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SCHROEDER • DAVIS



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THE STORM BIRDS

THE STORM BIRDS

By

SCHROEDER DAVIS

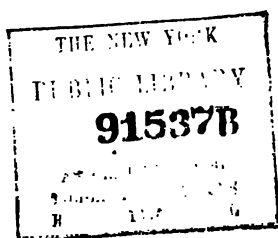
“The first object of diplomacy is the maintenance of peace”



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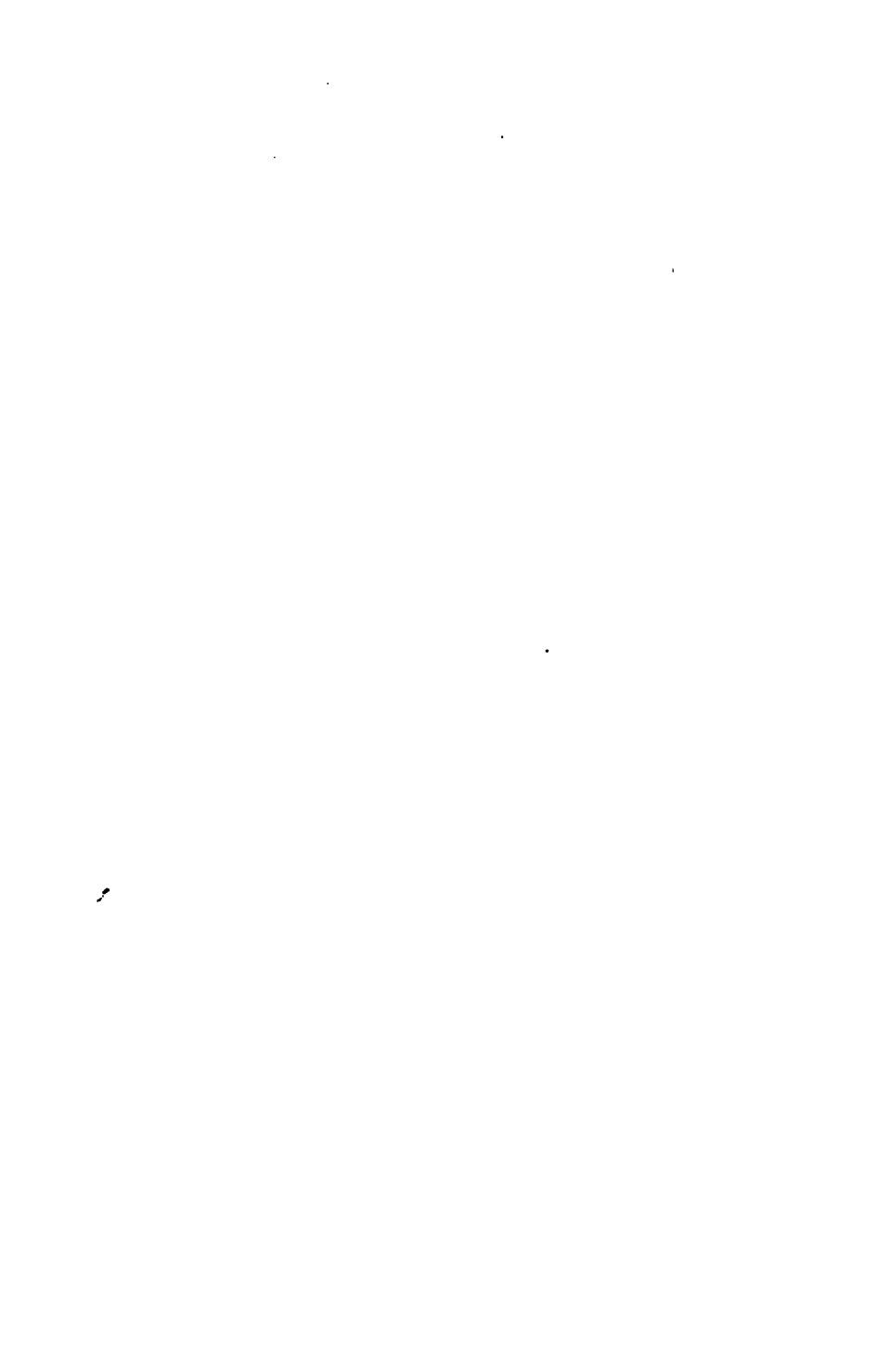
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THE STORM BIRDS



THE STORM BIRDS

CHAPTER I

SOME MANEUVERS IN VENICE

"PROCEED Venice immediately report commanding officer Louisville."

The young man in the first-class compartment of the afternoon train from Udine had already committed the words to memory; their first perusal had fixed them indelibly in his mind. But he spread out the slip of paper on which they had been hurriedly scrawled and examined it with an intensity of interest which would have betrayed at once to any onlooker that the message held some hidden meaning which he was striving in vain to penetrate. There were no curious eyes to observe him, however. He was the only passenger in the only first-class compartment in the train, one of those delightfully inconsequential, dawdling affairs which, in this country, would be labeled "accommodation," or "mixed freight," in the schedules of the railroad, and which, in Europe, not being rated officially as "express," never ruffle the serenity of their slumbrous dignity by moving faster than an excited small dog can run.

The solitary first-class passenger was not disturbed, however, by the speed,—or lack of it,—of this train.

It was the first train he could have taken from Vienna to Venice after receiving that curious but mandatory message, and that met his only condition. And he counted himself more than ordinarily fortunate that he was alone. He had thoughtfully reinforced the solitude-compelling grandeur of the first-class compartment by a substantial tip to the guard, in order to insure that privilege. It gave him the better opportunity to ponder the words he so continually reread, and to talk over with himself their import.

Manifestly he was not mentally at ease. The glorious panorama of gently undulating woods and fields, drenched in the liquid yellow of mid-November sunshine, had no interest for him. He was not lolling back restfully on the luxurious first-class cushions and gazing delightedly upon the inspiring scene slowly unrolled before him. He sat bolt upright, with brows knit and eyes fixed on the paper in his hands, as if by mere force of concentration to compel it to tell him what message it held beyond its immediate mandate. For there was no secret in the words themselves, it was in the motive for sending them that the mystery lay.

The young man suddenly thrust the slip into his pocket, and, pulling out his keys, unlocked a securely fastened portfolio that formed part of his hand luggage, and from it removed another paper. This was the cause of all his perturbation,—the cable message whose code words, when translated, formed the order that so puzzled him, but which he was

nevertheless obeying with such literal promptness that he had caught the first train out of Vienna after receiving it.

The cablegram was addressed simply to "Sampson Black, Vienna," and was signed with a plain American name, borne by so many thousands of the citizens of the Republic that there was absolutely nothing about it to attract the attention of the most suspiciously inquisitive telegraph clerk through whose hands it might have to pass. Mr. Sampson Black, evidently an American millionaire, traveling leisurely about the capitals of Europe, had merely received a telegram from home, inquiring in terms of the most commonplace family solicitude, as to the date of his return. But spelled out into those other words on the paper in his pocket, the message was an order to Lieutenant-Commander Stewart Blake, United States Navy, who was in Europe on a secret mission of the utmost importance to his government. And the familiar signature was the official name of the famous admiral at the head of the navigation bureau, in Washington, who directed the movements of Blake and his fellow-officers, intelligent but often uncomprehending pawns in the vital game then going on in the capitals of both hemispheres.

Commander Blake had just returned to Washington from a cruise on the Asiatic station when he was sent jig-stepping about the Continent. That little cloud which had been lowering over Cuba for so long, had increased very greatly in size lately, and had taken on a darker and more sinister hue. The

forerunners of public clamor began to make themselves heard at home, declaring intolerable the situation in the Island Empire of Spain, and demanding that it be brought to a stop, by peaceful methods if possible, by force if necessary. It was a condition discussed by thoughtful men in the government only under the breath and in confidential places with no danger of being overheard. There were graybeards among them who knew from painful experience the full meaning of war, but while they did everything in their power to avert it, they also did what they could to make preparation for it, if, in the end, it had to be.

Blake, in pursuance of this preparation, had traveled to the capitals of Europe, seeking everywhere to learn what he might of the movements of any Spanish agents. It was a time, when, naturally, all Europe would be engaged in intrigue. It was Commander Blake's business to find out where and to what extent any of the intrigues touched his service. He had not been unsuccessful, but now, suddenly and unexpectedly, just when he believed himself on the track of Spanish operations of the utmost importance to watch, came this order to hurry to Venice and report on board the "Louisville."

"Something conclusive has surely turned up," he told himself, "and I suppose somebody else got it, —worse luck! Washington knows all about it, of course, but what they want me to do in Venice is more than I can see just now. Well, I suppose I shall know before long."

He leaned back against the cushions as if to dismiss the riddle from his mind, but in a minute he was sitting forward again, staring at his papers, as before. He had a peculiar habit, when deeply absorbed, of thrusting forward his chin and drawing down his wrinkled brows until chin and brows and nose seemed almost to meet in a point of concentration. A shrewd guess would have put his age at a little more than thirty years, perhaps thirty-one. Not more. He had the shoulders of an athlete, and as he leaned forward his back showed broad and straight and powerful. The length of it, and the reach of leg from hip to knee, would make him stand, perhaps, a trifle under six feet. His rather close-fitting coat revealed a well-knit figure, such that when he stepped on the scales he probably made the hundred-and-eighty-pound weight bob up at the other end of the bar. His hands were big, strong, large-veined, with spatulate, efficient fingers—the hands of a man who does things, who reaches out and grasps and holds.

But, after all, it is the face that tells most of the story of a man's character. There are those who would say that he was handsome, but that is the truth of almost any man who has honest eyes and a self-respecting chin, and whose features have not been mixed up with a boiler explosion or railway accident. If his nose had not been so well shaped, so straight, so determinedly pointed, it would have been too large. But, like his bony hands, it was a mark of strength, revealing, with the firm chin, a

man of determination, honesty, and courage. There was that about the lips, and in the wide set, steady, gray eyes, that matched the strength of hands and nose and chin. He was well, but not showily, dressed, and looked altogether a clean-cut, dependable sort of young man,—the kind whose close proximity would make one feel less uncomfortable in a tight fix; whom you would like to have along in a dangerous emergency, and whose course in a crisis it would never occur to you to question.

It was well on into the afternoon when the train rolled into the station and Lieutenant-Commander Blake stepped out among the crowd of passengers bustling about for gondolas to distribute them to their various destinations. He paused for a moment, to welcome himself back to Venice, to breathe his lungs full of the balmy air, and to look up at the wonderful heaven that made him glow with the mere joy of being alive. It was years since he had been there, and the back-rush of memory caught and filled him with the glamor and delight of the days spent there on that long-ended cruise. Then a melodious voice at his side broke in on him with:

“Meester, you want-a da bote? Tak-a my bote. Nice-a bote!”

Blake turned and met the smiling face of a solicitous gondolier, who stood, cap in hand, pointing to the shiny black boat that bobbed up against the stone steps. “Plenty Americano genteman take-a my bote.”

"How d'you know I'm American, you rascal?" asked Blake, good-humoredly.

"Me good Americano," answered the boatman, showing his white teeth in a broad grin. "Americano cit. Gotta da pape. You take-a my bote?"

He dived into the pocket of his jacket and fished out the naturalization papers he had gone to New York to get, on the shrewd guess that they would increase his business with the lavishly paying American visitors to Venice. Blake didn't care whether the papers were genuine or not. The man amused him, and with a nod of assent he replied to the repeated solicitation.

"You gotta da tronk?" asked the boatman, as the officer stepped down toward the gondola.

For the moment Blake had forgotten that important part of his luggage. He turned to the baggage-room after it, with the gondolier following. But before he had taken half a dozen steps a suggestion of the possible value of this "American citizen" as a guide made him stop and turn.

"Here, you American," he said, briskly, "how many American warships are here now?"

The gondolier's face lighted up eagerly. "'Mericano gunbote?" he repeated, questioning. "You 'Mericano captain? Not got 'Mericano gunbote here long time. All go 'way. Bimeby jus' now, to-day morning, one come. You want-a go gunbote?"

Without replying Blake swung around and started again for the baggage-room. "Thornton is on the

dot," he said to himself. He picked out his trunk, saw the man hoist it up on his shoulder, and started back to the gondola. At the top of the landing steps, as the gondolier put down the trunk preparatory to stowing it away on his boat, Blake asked, as if there had been no break in the talk:

"Where does she lie?"

The man looked up blankly, and Blake repeated the question: "Where is the gunboat?"

"There!" said the gondolier, waving his hand vaguely in the direction of the outer roadstead, "way off, verra far."

"All right," said Blake, "we'll go to her."

He dropped the portfolio, which he had carried all the time, on the seat under the hood of the gondola, and stood for a moment watching the man with the trunk. They were almost ready when Blake saw coming down the steps toward them a man the sight of whom brought a sudden exclamation of anger and dismay to his lips.

"Damnation!" he muttered, and almost involuntarily made a move to jump into the boat and conceal himself under its curtains. But he was too late. For at that moment the newcomer waved his hand in friendly salute and called out:

"Hello, Black! What the deuce are you doing here? I didn't expect to see you in Venice! When d'you get in? Only now, I fancy, from the luggage."

He moved swiftly up to Blake, with outstretched hand, and the navy officer, fuming inwardly but with

as much show of pleasure as he could manage on such short notice, shook hands.

"Hello, Alvarez! How'd you get here? I thought you were going back to Paris?"

"But that was in Vienna," returned the other, smilingly. "So many things happen to change one's plans, you know, when there is only fancy for a motive. But you? You stop here for a visit? Delightful! You will be at the Grande? I am there, too. So glad we shall be together once more. We shall see more of each other this time. There is so much of Venice to see. You stop long? We can be so lazy together!"

Blake had been thinking rapidly while the man he addressed as Alvarez rattled on, and his plan was formed by the time he had opportunity to speak.

"No," he said, "not at the Grande this time. I shall go to the Waldhausen. Some Berlin friends are to be there, and we have planned to run about a little."

He moved forward as if to get into the gondola, hoping that the stiffness of his reply, ignoring as it did the companionship Alvarez had proffered, would check any further advances. But he was disappointed. Alvarez did not mean to be put off so lightly.

"Won't you invite me to join you as far as your hotel?" he asked, pleasantly. "The canal is delightful at this hour. It is so gay, so brilliant, with all the people. It seems like the parade on our beautiful Prado, in Havana. Everyone goes out,

you know, for the evening drive there, and here it is for the evening row on the canal. Ah yes, I know what you would say,—‘with a fair companion.’ But, *que va?* If one has not the lady, then one must do the best he can, and perhaps even Alvarez might be a substitute.”

There was nothing for it but to acquiesce, and Blake made way for the other to step into the gondola, with as much grace as he could. He leaned forward and caught the eye of the gondolier.

“Hotel Waldhausen,” he commanded, with significant emphasis, “quick!”

Then followed a moment of anxious suspense, when he waited expectantly to hear the man question the change of directions and ask if he should not go to the cruiser. But he was a gondolier fit for diplomatic employment, this “American citizen,” and he obeyed orders without discussion. If his patrons changed their minds it was none of his business. He lunged forward on his sweep, and the gondola shot out from the landing in swift response.

“No, no, Black!” protested Alvarez. “Not quickly! Let us linger. It is the most delicious hour of all the day. The canal is entrancing now. Let us go slowly and enjoy it to the full.”

He prattled on gayly, unmindful of Blake, who, with lack of interest deliberately intended not to be overlooked, leaned back in his place and occupied himself with his own thoughts.

Blake did not like Alvarez, at best, and the meet-

ing now was most inopportune. Besides, there was something about it which struck him as indicating more than a singular coincidence. It was the fourth time that this man had crossed his path since he set out on his mission in the European capitals. They had met first, quite by accident, in Paris. Blake had forgotten who introduced them, but the Cuban had immediately attached himself to the American with a tenacity that at times had been decidedly disconcerting. Alvarez was a striking type of a striking class,—the pompous, vain, self-conscious dandy, who heartily approves his own personal appearance and vaunts himself on being a man of the world, especially in the somewhat sinister sense. He was a fine example of the dashing handsome Cuban of old Spanish blood—tall, straight, sinewy, with dark skin, piercing eyes, and silky jet mustache that matched his thick, black hair.

It was but a few days after Blake had gone to Berlin that they had met again in a restaurant there; again quite by chance. Blake thought nothing of it then. Alvarez apparently took him to be merely a rich American traveling for amusement, and with Cuban vivacity and effervescent hospitality set out to entertain the representative of the great nation that was championing the cause of his own poor, oppressed fatherland. He was an ardent patriot, this ebullient Cuban, and his heart went out to every friend of his race with true Cuban spontaneity. He talked to Blake by the hour about the troubles and outrages of his country, yet never seemed to mind

the American's lack of interest and non-committal replies.

Blake had no suspicion then that Alvarez might not be a Cuban, but he was too well trained in his business to comment, even casually and in the worthiest sentiments, before a chance acquaintance of whom he knew absolutely nothing. He accepted this Cuban for what he seemed to be, and let it go at that, with hardly a thought about him and certainly no suspicion, at first, that there might be anything beneath the surface.

But when Alvarez turned up in Vienna the natural caution of the officer was emphasized, and he was more than ever careful in his words and actions. Alvarez had hindered and delayed his work in the French and German capitals, but had not thwarted it. In Vienna it was more difficult to throw him off, but Blake believed he had succeeded, though with undeniable relief he had said good-by when Alvarez left him, to start, as he said, for Paris.

And now here he was again, and again meeting by chance. It struck Blake that there was too much method in this chance. There seemed to be a certainty about it that robbed it of something, at least, of the fortuitous. He began to suspect that Alvarez was a Spanish agent.

How much did he know? Had he learned the real purpose of Blake's traveling about? Did he know that Black the tourist was Blake the naval officer on a secret mission? Or was it merely that he suspected something and was on the lookout for

developments? There were possibilities in that line of speculation that almost made Blake wish he was not to report aboard the "Louisville" so soon, and might have time for further work on Alvarez himself, now that his suspicion and interest in the subject were so thoroughly aroused.

The gondola had moved out from the basin at the station long before Blake had finished this train of thought, and they were well along in the canal when Alvarez succeeded in interrupting him. The Cuban had been talking gayly most of the time, in his usual frivolous style, without noticing that his companion was giving no heed. But at length he turned directly on Blake with a remark that forced attention.

"You are moody, my dear Black, moody! Ah, you Americans! How can you sit silent before such a panorama? Such a glorious sunset! Such a wonderful sky! Such life! Such motion! Man, it is poetry that we live now! And it lasts but a moment, yet you do not heed!"

With an effort Blake shook off his mood and responded. "Same old Alvarez," he said lightly, "only a little more sublimated than usual. You had better be careful or some of these days you will etherealize yourself in one of those transports and blow away on the balmy breeze that affects you so much."

"Cynic!" retorted Alvarez, with mock seriousness. "How is the bear market? Or is it the bull market? I do not know your Wall Street jargon.

Has something happened to stir up the animals in your financial menagerie that makes you so solemn at the most glorious moment of all your life?"

The gondola swung in at the hotel landing, and without replying Blake stood up to get out. He was about to commit the discourtesy of leaving his guest for the ride to shift about for himself, when he reflected that it would not be wise to do anything that might lead Alvarez to imagine that he suspected him. Checking himself in time he made way for the other to step out. Then he followed, pausing on the landing step to tell the gondolier to wait with the trunk until he had made certain of his accommodations in the hotel. The notion had crossed his mind that he might be able right here to escape the annoying watchfulness of Alvarez and get away to the "Louisville" without further delay. The Cuban waited at the top of the landing, all smiles and enthusiasm.

"A thousand thanks, my dear Black," he cried, as the American came up to him. "We have lived a supreme quarter of an hour; I in the highest enjoyment of beautiful Venice, you absorbed in the mazes of your financial game. Which profits the more, my friend?"

Blake put out his hand as if to say good-by. "You are incorrigible, Alvarez," he said, pleasantly. "The soul of a poet or artist, and the industry of a tramp. Mooning over beloved Venice while beloved Cuba groans under the tyrant's yoke! For

shame, patriot! Why don't you go home and fight?"

This outburst of raillery was the most successful move Blake possibly could have made. It was so great a change from anything Alvarez had seen in him before, and came so unexpectedly, that the Cuban was completely nonplussed for once, his ready persiflage cut short. Blake followed his advantage smartly.

"I'm for a tub and a shave," he went on, "or I'd ask you to stop for a drink. But I'll look you up later in the evening, or to-morrow. Good-by, glad we met again."

He dropped the hand he had been shaking mechanically, turned and strode swiftly into the hotel, leaving his companion puzzled and uncertain what to do.

A moment Alvarez stood thus, hesitating. Then, recovering his jaunty manner, he sauntered slowly up the Piazza in the direction of the Grande. Outwardly all was well with him, and his soul seemed at peace with the world. But under his silky mustache his white teeth ground against themselves, and from between them there oozed out a series of Spanish expletives not at all in keeping with his serene exterior. The mask was up, but the man behind it was telling himself that he had been rebuffed just at the most critical moment, when he had believed himself upon the very point of either proving his theory regarding this provoking American, or seeing it entirely exploded and thereby set-

ting himself free to go on to other tasks. Fortune had played fairly into his hands again that afternoon, and he had not availed himself of the opportunity. "Fool!"

"But yet, wait! Ha!" he cried. "I am even a bigger fool than I admit to myself!"

He turned abruptly on his tracks and walked swiftly back to the Waldhausen. There, seating himself at one of the small tables on the Piazza in front of the hotel, he ordered a glass of sherry and waited nonchalantly for developments. A glance from the tail of his eye as he sat down disclosed the fact that the gondola was still waiting, with Blake's trunk yet aboard.

CHAPTER II

AN AFFAIR OF HONOR IS POSTPONED

HIGHLY elated at the apparent success of his maneuver Lieutenant-Commander Blake walked into the office of the hotel and made leisurely pretense of searching for his friends, even taking the trouble to make inquiries whether certain imaginary persons had been there, or had engaged quarters, and if so, for what time. That business concluded he asked about accommodations for himself. Then, judging that sufficient time had been allowed to permit Alvarez to get out of sight, he suddenly determined not to stop at the Waldhausen, after all, but to seek his friends elsewhere. Leaving the expostulating dignitary behind the desk Blake moved toward the door, declining the proffered assistance of two or three obsequious attendants who hopefully endeavored to relieve him of his portfolio. He had almost reached the entrance when he stopped and returned to the desk. In that instant he had seen the necessity of a shift in plan, and now promptly engaged the quarters he had rejected but a minute before, and gave directions to have his trunk brought in.

"Wait," he commanded the porter, as that official moved away to give his orders. "Tell the gondolier that I engage him for all the time I am in

Venice, and will pay well. He is to go away now, but to return in an hour, and go to the side landing, not the front. You understand?"

"Very well, monsieur," replied the porter, pocketing his fat tip. He went out himself to deliver the instructions, so that there might be no possible mistake. This was a man with a mystery, and experience proved that there would be good rewards for attending strictly to his wants.

Alvarez had made a second slight mistake. He had been too much hurried. His first little slip had flustered him somewhat, and he had chosen his table without reflection, taking one near the door, where he himself was in plain sight from within. Thus it was that Blake, starting again for the gondola when he thought the coast clear, and confident of getting away at last for the ship, caught sight of the Cuban just taking his seat, and realized instantly that the game was on in earnest. Obviously it was time to change tactics.

His mind worked rapidly in such emergencies, and by the time he had returned to the desk he had determined upon his first steps. He would pretend to be about to stop for some time. Then, when he had made sure that the man who was spying on his movements, as he now believed Alvarez to be doing, had been forced to relax his vigil for a time, he would slip away by the side landing and get out to the ship before the Cuban could recover. So he gave the order to have his trunk brought in, and followed it with the directions for the gondolier,

thinking it better to employ a man who, he knew already, could take him to the cruiser, than to make a hunt for another, a hunt that might easily enable Alvarez to learn what had become of him.

Alvarez, meantime, was sipping his sherry with lazy deliberation, his self-contentment entirely restored. He had his quarry trapped, and was in position to give himself again to the full enjoyment of his dilettante appreciation of sun and sky and water and what he called Venetian sunset life. But he was not too much absorbed in pleasure to give some heed to business, and he noted with satisfaction the removal of Blake's trunk and the departure of the gondola. Yes, the quarry was trapped, for the time being, at least. The American could not leave the hotel without his knowledge, and he might be able to join or follow as seemed best at the moment. He laughed softly to himself to think that now he had the situation in his own hands, and tapped himself gently on the forehead, in private commendation of his wit.

"Shrewd! Shrewd!" he said. "It was a good move to come here. That warship is the bait that brings him. Perhaps now it even comes for him. Ah ha! If that is it, what a stroke it was this afternoon! Didst thou not judge well, Genoso, when the report reached thee in Vienna that this ship was in the Adriatic, in selecting Venice rather than Trieste? Ah,——" he tapped his forehead patronizingly again, "it is a *cochon* of an officer that has been spying about Europe, this rich and leisurely

traveler! Pig!" The villainous Spanish expletives again oozed from between the grinding teeth.

The lights were coming up along the canal and in the buildings, the boat lanterns gliding noiselessly over the water like huge will-o'-the-wisps, swinging in and out, twisting and turning in a weird, labyrinthine, mystic dance. Alvarez bethought himself that it was time for dinner. He had been so occupied with his watching and his thoughts that he had not noticed the flight of time. The idlers along the Piazza, stopping now and then for a flask of chianti, had not disturbed him. He had hardly seen even those who sat next him. He rightly conjectured that it would be some time before Blake ventured out again, but the slight chance that he might be mistaken had kept him at his post. He summoned a waiter and ordered his meal, with as much care and fastidiousness as if he had nothing else to concern himself about, and when that was done lighted a cigarette and strolled across the Piazza while he waited for the food.

He was not familiar with the Waldhausen or its situation, and it was only chance that took him to a position whence he could see the side entrance. Instantly he was seized with misgiving lest he had carelessly permitted the American to escape unnoticed while he fruitlessly watched the unused exit. But even as he began to upbraid himself for his folly he saw among the waiting gondoliers the man in whose boat he and Blake had ridden that evening. He remembered that the man spoke a little English,

and at once it came to him that Blake had engaged the fellow to wait until he was needed. Reassured by the thought Alvarez shifted to a table whence he could observe both landings and fell to his meal with added zest.

He ate and drank with leisurely ease, and sipped his cordial and enjoyed his cigarette undisturbed, for Lieutenant-Commander Blake was not the man to put his fortunes unwarily to the test, and now that he was convinced Alvarez represented some secret menace to him he was content to take plenty of time before making another move. He had his luggage up, tubbed and shaved, and then carefully repacked his belongings so as to have them ready for instant removal if the opportunity came. Then he dined, deliberately and well. He had the meal served in his room, choosing its solitude in preference to the rather two-edged chance of the public dining-room or the tables on the Piazza, where the balance hung even between seeing something that might be of service to him and being seen by someone he would much rather avoid. He put in an hour ruminating over his acquaintance with Alvarez, and was pleased that he could not recall a single incident or remark which might have given the spy a clew as to his real identity or occupation.

Alvarez had played his part well, and Blake had endured the hindering annoyance of the man's unsolicited friendship without any feeling of resentment, attributing it merely to the enthusiasm naturally to be expected from a true Cuban for a citizen of

the country that was doing so much for his. But now he did not doubt that Alvarez was really a Spaniard playing the Cuban rôle, although it was true he might be a renegade islander attached to the Madrid monarchy through personal and selfish motives.

It was all one to Blake, however; his problem was to get away. He took it for granted that the "Louisville's" commander had been informed from Washington of his movements, and was now on the lookout for him. Thornton might even have come ashore himself, or sent some of the other officers to meet him. In that event, not knowing his traveling name, their time would be wasted if he did not show himself where they might have opportunity to recognize him. But if he did show himself there was danger that he would be addressed by his real name before he could prevent it. He was well acquainted with Captain Thornton, but having no information as to the complement of the cruiser he did not know whether any of his friends were aboard or not.

Then it occurred to him that he had done nothing to find out whether Alvarez was still on watch. If not, he might be free to get away at once. So he took a cautious look from his windows to see if the enemy had withdrawn.

Fortune certainly favored the spy then. By a singular chance Blake inspected the two landings and saw no trace of the Cuban. His room was in the corner of the building, with windows on both the

side and in front. It happened that just as he looked out at the side landing Alvarez, grown restless at the long wait, strolled from his table across the front of the hotel. But when Blake moved to his front window Alvarez had returned to his table and passed around the corner to the side, so that both times the American missed his man.

Blake had seen his gondolier waiting at the side landing, and now, concluding that Alvarez had abandoned his vigil, he hastened downstairs, determined to waste no time over his luggage but go straight to the cruiser and have Captain Thornton send in another man with an order for it. If he had known what Alvarez was doing he might have got away, for the Cuban had prolonged his stroll in front of the hotel a little way up the Piazza, and was moving so slowly that if Blake had timed his exit for the moment when the spy started away from the side, he might have gained his gondola and been off before Alvarez returned. But it chanced that exactly at the moment when he emerged from the hotel door Alvarez came around the corner and they met, face to face.

Both men started involuntarily, but Blake was the first to recover.

"Hello, Alvarez!" he exclaimed, heartily, "I was just going down to the Grande to look you up. My friends have not come yet and I have nothing to do."

"Delighted!" returned Alvarez, quickly, at his ease once more. "It was with exactly the idea to

look you up that I had just come here." Which, for once, was the literal and exact truth, as Blake thought, with a grim chuckle to himself.

"I was going to propose a little row on the canal," continued the Cuban. "The night is superb, and it is a shame to sit idly in a hotel when such pleasure is to be had afloat!"

"Good idea," said Blake, with prompt acquiescence. "I don't mind if I do." Caught thus there was no way to refuse.

They moved together down the steps, and choosing, as if by accident, the gondola Blake had engaged, threw back the hood the better to enjoy the perfect night, and floated swiftly out into the stream of boats that moved along the canal. The sky was that rare vision of wonder and loveliness one sees only in Venice, dusted with myriads of twinkling stars that paled ever so slightly in the thin light of a lean crescent moon, already drifted far toward the western horizon.

Blake was not in a talkative mood. Even if the perplexity of his affairs had not inclined him to reverie, the mystic beauty of the night would have moved him to silence. Alvarez, however, babbled like a mountain brook. Both the spell of the scene and what he felt to be the necessity of the occasion impelled him to talk. It was in keeping with the character he had established for himself that he should. But though the rush of words that came from his lips had the speed of the mountain stream, neither in purity nor any other respect were they like

it. He had played a false part too long, a part foreign to his strong nature, and under the strain of an impending crisis he felt himself relaxed rather than keyed to higher endeavor. Blake felt it, too, with growing disgust for the man he had never liked. He determined suddenly to make another attempt to lose his pursuer by dropping him at the Grande, willing or not, and then trusting to luck to shake off pursuit in the maze of gondolas on the canal.

He was about to propose going in when they came near a little cluster of boats surrounding a gondola in which several persons were singing. Borne across the water on the soft night air the voices came with unusual sweetness, and, perhaps because they were singing the home songs in the home tongue, they moved Blake to a mood long unknown to him.

For the time he forgot himself in the music. One voice especially, he marked—a low, mellow soprano, of singular charm and power. It touched him with a reminiscent thrill of familiarity, like the sudden apparition of an emotion long past. Then the mocking voice of his companion broke in on him with a ribald jest that made him shiver by its coarseness. He threw out an impatient gesture of such evident displeasure that even the reckless Alvarez deemed it the better policy to hold his peace.

They drifted a few moments in silence, and then, across the night from the gondola ahead, rose that moving voice, singing alone a song that instantly brought back to Blake, in full, vivid detail, a scene that had left its lasting impress upon his heart. It

was a setting of "In a Gondola," composed by a friend of his boyhood days in the old home made dear to him by a thousand ties:

*"I send my heart up to thee, all my heart
In this my singing.
For the stars help me, and the sea bears part;
The very night is clinging
Closer to Venice's streets, to leave one space
Above me, whence thy face
May lift my joyous heart to thee, its dwelling place!"*

Stirred to the deeps, with an emotion he had not known himself capable of feeling, Blake saw again that afternoon in Washington, nearly four years gone by, when he had heard that song for the first time. He knew the voice now, and the singer. He remembered how she looked that afternoon—how many, many times since then had he remembered it! He felt again the thrill that went through him like an electric shock when he took her hand in his at parting. They had met but that once, when she sang for him the song his friend had written. Next day he started for the Asiatic station, and when the three years of his cruise were ended, and he returned to Washington, she was no longer there.

"In Europe," they had replied to his casual question, "traveling with her aunt since her mother died."

What dreams had he dreamed alone in his cabin

away out there in the tropics! What castles had he builded! Only he knew, and he had long put them aside. Poor, foolish, childish pleasures of an hour! How his mates would have scoffed if they had ever suspected the unsentimental Blake of such occupation for his idle hours.

Into the midst of that flood of song-evoked emotion burst the careless Alvarez with a sneer.

"A compatriot of yours, my dear Black! They like to sing in such public places, the American women. Attracts attention, you know, and——"

"Stop!" The word came from Blake with the explosive force of a shot from a six-pounder. He leaned forward with a sudden gesture so menacing that the sneer died instantly on the lips of the astonished Cuban. "You dirty hound! I don't know whether to thrash you here or take you back and boot you down the Piazza to your hotel!"

For a moment Alvarez was too amazed to move or speak. But he was not without courage of a certain sort, and this was a direct insult of a kind that he was quick to resent. His black eyes flashed and a villainously savage exclamation broke from his lips. Then his hand went into his breast pocket and his fingers touched a jeweled hilt that protruded from a small leather case. He started forward as if to spring at the throat of the man who had checked him.

But he reckoned without his man, or his rage made him forget the caution due one trained as the naval officer had been. Blake had risen as Alvarez did,

and now, as the Cuban moved forward, the American's right hand shot out and caught him full on the jaw. The whole power of the hundred and eighty pounder was in the blow, and it knocked the Cuban fairly off his feet. He fell backward, over the side of the boat, and before Blake could spring to catch him, had plunged head down, into the canal.

At the splash the gondolier, who had looked on unmoved by the sudden outburst of wrath, checked the boat and stood with Blake peering into the water. In a moment Alvarez came to the surface, and that instant the American leaped in after him. It needed but a stroke or two to put him beside the man he had struck, and the next minute he had Alvarez back in the gondola and had ordered the boatman to go with all speed to the Grande hotel.

It was rage, not the blow or the water, that hurt Alvarez. For a few moments he could only rave and curse in the fearful Spanish oaths in which he was so fluent. Then, as his breath returned more fully, he gave his attention to Blake.

"Bully! Coward! Pig!" he cried, shaking with anger. "You shall give me satisfaction for this!"

"At your service, Alvarez," replied Blake, calmly. "Whenever you please. But first you had better get to your hotel and find dry clothing. And next time I advise you to confine your insults to women of your own kind if you have to pick women for your victims."

"I shall send you a friend at your hotel within

an hour," cried the furious Cuban. "Within an hour. You understand?"

"All right, Alvarez. Don't keep me waiting too long."

But Alvarez was beyond retort, engulfed, overwhelmed with rage. He could only repeat, in choking voice: "Within an hour. Within an hour!"

Still sputtering angrily the Cuban was put ashore at the Grande landing, and Blake set out at once for his own hotel. Arrived there he sat down at one of the garden tables and wrote rapidly for a minute in his notebook. He tore out the leaf, folded it, and addressed it to the commander of the "Louisville."

"My dear Captain," ran the note, "I am here to report to you, but this is not official. I can't do that yet for a little while. I got into a row with a Spanish spy who has been following me; knocked him into the canal; fished him out, and am challenged to fight him within the hour. I shall be out as soon after that as I can make it."

He signed this with his traveling name, but gave his signal number as well, in case Thornton did not know his European signature.

"Take that to the American gunboat," he commanded the gondolier. "Quick, you understand?"

"Sure, Mike," responded the "American citizen."
"Me know," and off he went.

Thereupon Blake went coolly up to his room, opened his trunk and shifted clothing. Then he had what passed at the Hotel Waldhausen for an

American drink, lighted a cigar, and sat down to smoke for the rest of the hour which Alvarez had intimated would be his last on earth. He had no notion what sort of a game the Cuban would fix up for him, and it didn't much matter. He was rather inclined to smile at the whole affair, except that his anger rose sharply every time he thought of the insult to that girl he had seen but once, nearly four years ago. He realized keenly the absurdity of the situation. An American officer fighting a duel with a half-crazed Cuban because of a row in a boat? It was preposterous! Yet that was precisely what he was intending to do. He would violate the regulations, fail to obey orders, risk his professional career—he never thought that he might also risk his life—and generally make a fool of himself merely to salve the injured honor of a Spanish spy who had been dogging him about Europe for two months.

Absurd? To be sure! But he was quite clear that it was the only thing he could do. He might have taken a gondola and gone out to the "Louisville" unmolested now, but instead he sat there puffing his cigar and humming, whimsically:

*"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honor more."*

Surely he was not going to permit a contemptible whelp like Alvarez to go running about the world accusing him of avoiding a fight.

The Cuban's hour was nearly up, and Blake had lighted his second cigar, when he was interrupted by a resounding thump on his door, followed immediately by the entrance of two men in the uniform of United States naval officers. The swords at their sides proclaimed them to be on duty. Blake jumped to his feet at once, and instantly taking in the formal character of the call, raised his hand in salute to the elder of the two officers and said:

"Captain Thornton, I report to you, sir, for special duty, in accordance with telegraphic orders."

Then, turning to the younger officer, he exclaimed: "Hello, Bull! Glad to see you. I didn't know you were out here."

But Lieutenant Bull, instead of acknowledging the friendly hand proffered him, saluted stiffly and said:

"You are under arrest, sir, by orders of Captain Thornton. You will go aboard ship at once."

"Arrest!" cried Blake, almost too astonished to speak. "I don't understand. Captain Thornton, is that true? Isn't there a mistake?"

"None at all, sir, none at all," responded the captain, sternly. "You are under arrest by my orders and will go aboard at once. The cutter is waiting. Mr. Bull, have some of the men get this luggage."

"But I can't," protested Blake, as Bull started to obey his orders. "I must stay here. You got my note, didn't you, captain? That explained the reason. It will be only a few minutes more!"

"Do you mean to resist arrest, sir?" demanded Thornton, his voice rising toward the parade rasp, whose savage note would frighten a Bengal tiger.

Already the blue-jackets were hustling Blake's trunk down to the cutter, and one of them was rolling up the clothing still wet from the plunge into the canal.

"No, sir," said Blake, helplessly. "I cannot resist physically, but I do protest as vehemently as I can. If I had dreamed that my note would be put to such use I certainly should not have sent it. This makes me appear to be running away, and you know how you would feel about that, sir."

"Are you ready, Mr. Bull?" The question was Captain Thornton's only answer, and Blake saw that his appeal had failed.

"At least, sir," he tried again, "permit me to leave a note."

He sat down and wrote hastily: "Mr. Sampson Black regrets exceedingly his inability to keep his engagement with Señor Alvarez, and begs to explain that circumstances over which he has absolutely no control whatever have enforced his sudden and unexpected departure. Mr. Black begs to assure Señor Alvarez that, should they ever meet again, he will be most happy to fulfill his engagement then."

Blake closed the note and sealed it with his monogram, "S. B." As he left the hotel with Thornton and Bull he stopped at the desk and left his note.

"A gentleman will call for me very soon," he

said, "probably within a quarter of an hour. When he comes give him this note. Keep it until a gentleman calls for me."

A few minutes later he was following Thornton up the sea ladder of the cruiser "Louisville." As he reached the deck the captain threw one arm familiarly over his shoulder. Thornton was a young man for his rank, and Blake was an old friend.

"Now, you cheerful idiot," said Thornton, in a voice from which all the official asperity had disappeared, "kick all you like. Let 'er rip! But don't you ever think I would let you spoil everything at this juncture over a measly Dago! If it had been an Englishman, now, or a Dutchman, there might have been some use talking. But a Spaniard! Hell! The Old Man wants you at home just as soon as we can get there. Something is doing."

He turned and the parade rasp came back in his voice as he called:

"Orderly! Tell Mr. Waters to get under way at once."

Then, as the man saluted and moved away, Thornton dropped his arm from Blake's shoulder. "Bull will fix you out for quarters," he said. "Good-night."

CHAPTER III

THE SOUND OF A VOICE

ONE of those clear, crisp afternoons that make the delight of Washington winters was wearing to its close. There was just the nip in the eager air that made a strong, healthy man glory in the exercise of a brisk walk over the wooded hills about the capital, and Lieutenant-Commander Stewart Blake was enjoying it to the full. He had come from a long and serious conference with Admiral Crunfield at the Department, where he had gone over in minute detail all the results that had been accomplished by the two months of hard work since his return from Europe.

He had hardly been in Washington a day in that time, the Department having kept him more than occupied with a series of tasks which had taken him all over the country. Now, with his brain cleared by the sunshine and the breeze and the brisk walk, he was striding along, care-free and eager, hardly heeding where his path led, filled with the joy of earth and sky and woods.

He had turned from the main road into a bridle path that skirted the shaggy banks of the little stream that flows through the great park north of Washington. He was alone from choice, but it was not by design that he had chosen that path,

where the few and scattered hoof prints would have told a closer observer of infrequent use. He was so oblivious to the possibility of meeting or seeing another human that he did not hear the rapid foot-falls of a running horse on the path behind him, and it was not until he was roused by a sharp cry almost at his back, that he leaped to one side of the path and wheeled around. Then he saw what sent his blood whirling and stirred him instantly to action.

A splendid black horse was bearing down on him at the full run, with neck extended and head thrust forward, and eyes flashing with the joy of the thoroughbred in full stride. Blake hardly saw the rider. He knew by a sort of subconscious cerebration that it was a young woman who had lost control of the spirited animal and was in serious danger of grave injury from the headlong race of the horse through the trees. That came to him in a flash. He had no time for thought. The animal was on him.

He sprang forward, grasping at the reins with both hands. His left missed, but with his right he caught the curb and instantly his whole weight was thrown on the horse's head. The exercise Blake had had with the oars while a midshipman, and had kept up in his later years, told then. The strength it had put in his hand stood him in good stead. The impetus of the flying animal was hardly checked and Blake was whirled off his feet and thrown forward directly in front of the plunging hoofs. At the same moment he saw the rider struck by a low-hanging bough and scraped from her saddle.

As he saw her fall he was himself thrown heavily against a sapling on the edge of the path. It caught him all along the back, as if he had been flung against a stone wall. His grip on the rein held, but the stout leather parted, and the excited horse plunged on down the trail and disappeared in the woods.

For a moment Blake could not move. The breath had been knocked clear out of him, and he could not even speak. He was dazed by the shock of the blow against the sapling. But it was only for a moment. A few feet from him the young woman who had been thrown violently to the ground lay as if stunned by the fall. He sprang to her aid, and as he stooped to lift her from the ground saw, for the first time, her face. Her eyes were closed and all trace of color had fled from lips and cheeks, but in that first instant's glance he recognized, with a heart-stopping shock, the girl who had sung for him four years before, whose memory he had carried with him on all his wanderings since, and whose voice he had last heard in Venice, the night of his adventure on the canal. That moment she opened her eyes and looked him full in the face.

"Miss Lane!" he cried, and there was far more feeling in his voice than he would have cared to show in calmer moments, "are you hurt?"

He had started forward to lift her up with the utterly impersonal impulse that stirs all sincere men, to help first and leave inquiries to later occasion. The shock of recognition had checked him, with a

half-defined feeling that it would be profanation to touch her. It made him suddenly stiff and formal, and dried up the ready flow of speech in his lips. Her wide eyes looked at him steadily under their level brows, and if he had had quite his usual control of himself he would have seen in their expression a searching of memory in the effort to grasp the vague impression of acquaintance and fasten it to the identity of the man who had called her by name. But he had no thought of that. His only concern was for her safety, and again he moved toward her, with outstretched hand.

"You are hurt?" he repeated, questioningly. "May I help?"

"I hardly know," she replied, at length. "I think perhaps I was a little stunned by the fall."

She took the hand he offered and moved as if to rise. A sudden sharp compression of the lips warned Blake that the movement had cost her pain, and increased his fears that she had been injured. But instantly she recovered her composure and with his aid got to her feet. The first step brought a half-suppressed exclamation. Blake said nothing, but the solicitude in his face was an abiding question. She smiled, as she saw it, and answered at once.

"I am afraid I have wrenched my knee."

She had dropped his hand as soon as she stood up, and had been holding to a bush to steady herself. "I don't know if I shall be able to walk back to the road," she went on.

Blake was standing by the side of the path, filled with such a mixture of emotions that his usually ready wit had forsaken him, leaving his tongue helpless. She had not spoken his name, and he thought—with a curious pang—that she did not recognize him.

"I beg your pardon," he said, stiffly. "I am Stewart Blake."

"Yes," she replied, simply, "I remember. You are the friend of Frederic Ayres, who wrote the Gondola song."

Something in the recollection brought a faint flush back to her pale cheeks. To Blake the knowledge that she had remembered that afternoon was like a draft of elixir. It overwhelmed him, and made him suddenly as awkward and bashful as a country schoolboy. He simply stood and stared. It was she who took the lead.

"I must get back to the road," she said. "My friends will be looking for me."

The words brought Blake back to himself. He moved forward at once and offered his arm.

"If you will take my arm," he said, "or perhaps lean on my shoulder, we will try and see how that will go."

The touch of her hand on his arm was like the thrill of electricity through all his body, but the weight that she put on him after the first step told him far more plainly than any sign she let pass her lips the pain that the effort to walk cost her.

"You are badly hurt!" he exclaimed, anxiously. "Perhaps if you will sit down here for a minute or two I can find help."

It was nearing sundown, and the long shadows of the trees across the path warned her that it would soon be dark. She felt that at all cost she must reach the road where there would be the chance of securing assistance.

"No," she said, "I must not sit down. It would be worse then than now. It is only a little twist, and to walk will make it better." She paused, and the thought that she had not yet spoken of him brought the flush again to her face. "And you," she went on, "you must have been hurt yourself!"

"I?" he replied, lightly. "Oh, no! Only shaken up a bit. It got my breath for a second, but that was all. How did it happen?"

"We were coming up the road on the other side of the hill," she explained, "Bertie Wyndham and Percy and I, and Dandy was wild to go. He had not been out for several days. I was ahead. Some people came around the turn riding very fast and he bolted. I heard the others coming after me, but they couldn't keep in sight of Dandy when he wanted to run. He turned into the trees and they must have gone on down the road. But they'll come back right away and then we can send Percy in for the carriage."

Strive as she might she could not conceal the pain the twisted knee gave her.

"Is it far to the road?" she asked.

"I have no idea," he replied. "I don't even know where we are. I was walking aimlessly."

"Nor have I," she returned. "Dandy gave me all I could do to avoid the trees. I hope it isn't far!"

"Will you sit down and rest?" asked Blake, hesitatingly. "Shall I go on to the road and see if your friends have come back?"

"No, please," she said, quickly. "I—I'm afraid I should be afraid to be left alone here, now. If I only had a crutch!"

The old sensation of profanation returned sharply to Blake, and unconsciously he drew ever so slightly away. She felt the movement and misunderstood.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I am wearing you out!"

"Please don't!" he expostulated, with an earnestness that at any other time would have told her much more than the mere words meant. Then with a rush, he blurted out:

"I would gladly carry you, if you will!"

Instantly the color flamed in her cheeks. "Not that," she replied, "I can make it."

"Well," said Blake, doggedly, "I could, easily. I was the champion strong man of my class at Annapolis."

She laughed merrily. "Perhaps if you called they would hear," she suggested.

Obedient Blake promptly lifted up his voice and hailed. "Ahoy, there!" he shouted, as if he were calling across the deep to a ship. Unconsciously he used that quality of voice which long experience has

taught all navy men will carry farthest. The almost savage menace in it startled the girl.

It was his turn to laugh. "Did I frighten you?" he asked, softly. "That's the voice we use at sea, you know."

"Do you talk to the men like that?" she asked. "Mercy! I'm glad I'm not in the navy."

"They understand," he replied. "It's the voice that carries. Listen!"

He hailed again, twice, waited a moment and repeated the call. From the opposite slopes the echo rolled back clear and strong, but no human voice responded.

"I'm afraid they have gone on," he said.

"And so must we," she replied.

They walked slowly on, in silence, and Blake felt her weight thrown more and more on his sturdy shoulder. Momently he swung between agony and ecstasy. There was a tumult in his breast which robbed him of speech, and at times almost of self-control. One instant his heart was wrenched with realization of the suffering of the girl by his side, and the next it leaped with the recollection that after all those years she had remembered him. That throbbed through his brain over everything else. It was as if a great voice which only he could hear were booming through the woods: "She remembered! She remembered!" It so filled and enveloped him that presently it overwhelmed him, and without volition or conscious thought he turned and looked her straight in the face and said:

"You remembered!"

They were simple words, but the sundown shadows had need to be considerably deeper than they were to hide the flush that overspread her face. It was not the words themselves that sent the warm blood springing so quickly to her cheeks. They had been spoken in the tone that never a maiden since the first has failed to recognize, and not all her training could keep back the flaming response. But she looked up quickly at him and replied, with a smile:

"You had not forgotten."

Something in the matter-of-factness of her manner cut through the haze in which Blake had been enveloped and pulled him up just in time. Helen Lane was not a worldly young woman, but the experience of her years in Washington society had not been lost on her, and with a deftness that was hers by instinct as well as training she kept him away from a situation that even he, in his calmer moments, would not have wished to force.

Women are always clearer-headed than men in such moments, and have a steadier and firmer control of their emotions. Besides, Miss Lane was not conscious of any particular emotion in which Blake was a factor, except one of gratitude that he had been at hand when the accident occurred and was in position to help her when she needed help so much. It was true she had not forgotten him. Perhaps there was something of romanticism in the way her recollection lingered over that one afternoon when they had been together, four years be-

fore. She had laughed at herself, sometimes, for it, and told herself now that she remembered him only because he was a man who had done things that kept his name familiar in the circle of her friends and acquaintances.

As for Blake, her retort had made him suddenly and acutely conscious of his immediate situation. At once the surge of emotion which had almost engulfed him receded, and he devoted himself again, with practical energy, to the effort to get the injured girl back to her friends. Fortunately, they had almost reached the main road, and now, as it came in sight through the woods, they heard the clatter of hoofs coming briskly up the hill. Again Blake lifted up his "parade rasp" voice. But this time he varied his sea call.

"Oh, Wyndham!" he shouted, and before the neighboring hills gave back the echo there came the human response:

"Here! Where are you?"

Another minute and they were in the road, with Percy Wyndham and his sister dismounted beside them and both asking questions at once.

"What happened?" demanded Percy, eagerly. "Hello, Blake! How did you come to be here?"

"Are you hurt, Helen?" asked "Bertie" Wyndham, anxiously. "Why, how do you do, Mr. Blake? Wasn't it luck you were here?"

In a few minutes the story of the accident was told, and then Miss Lane calmly assumed charge

of further proceedings by turning to young Wyndham and saying:

"Percy, you ride in and bring out the carriage for us, please. Bertie can stay here until you get back."

But Bertie Wyndham had a mind of her own about that suggestion, being not entirely without the romantic instinct common to her sex.

"I'll go with Percy," she said, decisively, "and keep Aunt Jane from having heart failure. She'll think you have broken your neck instead of only twisting your knee, if Percy is left to tell her alone."

"Well, only hurry," said Miss Lane, assenting.

The Wyndhams were off at a smart gallop and Blake began looking around for a place where the injured girl could sit down to wait. He found a piece of board out of which, with the aid of three or four stones, he constructed a passable seat, where Miss Lane could rest against a tree.

"You knew them?" she asked, with tacit reference to the Wyndhams.

"Oh, yes, for years," he replied, complacently. "I helped to bring them up."

They fell silent again. Something in what had happened seemed to have taken from both the instinct for speech. The sun went down, and the evening air carried a sting that gave Blake a new anxiety for her.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked, whipping off his coat. "Please take it."

"No, please don't," she replied. "I am quite comfortable, and you will take cold."

"It's a poor sailor who can't keep warm in this weather," he returned, lightly, "and, besides, I can move about while you must sit still."

He threw the warm coat over her shoulders, and she salved her conscience by still protesting a little, and adding:

"I hope they won't be long."

Again Blake's concern was revealed in his voice. "I hope they won't," he assented, "I'm afraid you are more hurt than you have admitted."

Even as he spoke they caught the sharp stroke of hoofs on the hard road, and in another minute the carriage swung around and stopped beside them. The Wyndhams had come with it, and Percy jumped down to help Blake in the task that young man would have been quite content to perform alone, of helping Miss Lane to her place amid the robes and cushions.

It seemed to Blake that they had hardly started when they rolled under the *porte cochere* of a great Massachusetts Avenue mansion and stopped.

"Here?" he asked, betrayed into expressing surprise in spite of himself.

"I live with my aunt and uncle since my mother died," she replied, softly. "Mrs. Butworth is my mother's sister."

Again with unnecessary assistance from Percy Wyndham, Blake helped her from the carriage. But at the door there was one brief moment when he

and she were alone, while Percy turned to his sister.

"I may come?" he asked, and did not try to conceal his feeling.

"I shall be very glad," she answered.

"You remembered," he repeated, gently, and then, as she passed through the door, he turned and, declining the proffer of the carriage and the companionship of the Wyndhams, strode off down the avenue to his quarters, with something in his heart that made him forget the shaking up he had had that afternoon, forget even the work he had been doing those last few months, and remember only a face and a voice and a song,—the song he had heard last in Venice but that had been singing in his memory for years.

CHAPTER IV

ENTER THE VISCOUNT

HALF reclining in a long chair before a comfortable hickory fire in her "den," Helen Lane, her book long since discarded, stared steadily at the rain-beaten window, watching with absorbed attention the ragged course of the drops of water that moved occasionally across it. In fantastic lines they traveled, diagonally over the panes, following the slant of the sweeping wind that whistled outside. The window was partly sheltered from the direct beating of the storm, so that only an occasional gust of rain struck it, and the drops that formed at the upper sash hung tremulously on the glass for a while before they started on their tortuous journey to the bottom. They went with singular insistence, each its own way, but all on the same general course. Some straggled slowly, with barely sufficient energy to take them over the pane. Some hesitated, stopping at intervals, and dodging hither and thither in an agony of doubt and uncertainty, to be swallowed up utterly at last in the rush of a great overmastering drop that forged straight ahead with resistless sweep and gathered in as it went all that it found in its way.

"They are like men,—and life!" mused the girl.
"All but a few need the help and companionship

of their fellows to make even the slightest headway. But those few big ones, how they go! Nothing stops or turns them aside. That is like Uncle Val. How surely he moves to what he wants! Dear Uncle Val! Yes, he is certainly one of the big drops on the pane. And what a pane it is, this little world of ours! Just a swirl of wind and rain at the top, a helter-skelter dash across, and the end! "

At twenty-four Helen Lane was a woman whom few men, having seen her once, could forget. The impression she gave at first meeting was of striking beauty, but so subtle was the composition of her features that it defied subsequent analysis to give the proof. Was it in the light of her lustrous eyes, that men raved over and quarreled about, in the mere attempt to decide whether they were blue or gray? Was it in the curve of the rounded cheek and the exquisitely pointed chin? Or was it in that red-lipped mouth, that was firm yet yielding, stern yet tender, "ripe as the melting cluster," yet capable of being as cold as the marble portals of her uncle's mansion.

Ah, well, what anatomist of beauty can dissect and classify the elusive charm of a woman's soul? It was the spirit that shone through the lustrous eyes, and that recked not if lips were straight or curved, if nose was high-bridged and patrician or tip-tilted and provocative of mirth; there was the baffling power of this girl, who, at twenty-four, had passed unscathed through three seasons of the dazzling

whirl in Washington, and had seen one after another of the butterflies of wealth, fashion, and power flutter broken-winged at her feet without an added throb of the heart except in pity for what she could neither prevent nor help.

Something very unusual was stirring in the secret soul depths of this young woman that dreary afternoon in midwinter as she watched the rain-swept window and philosophized on the similarity between raindrops and men. It was but a few days since the most extraordinary experience of her life, and she was trying to demonstrate to herself why it was the most extraordinary. There was nothing novel in being run away with. That had happened to her several times before. Nor was the novelty in being thrown. One who had followed the hounds as often and as hard as she must count that experience as all in the day. Nor yet was it in the fact that she had been helped by a young and prepossessing man. From every walk of life cavaliers had sprung to her assistance many times before.

In the time she had spent with her uncle and aunt since the death of her widowed mother had left her homeless, three years before, she had known her full share of masculine attention, and more. The heiress of Vallandingham Butworth, possessor of more millions than any man—even himself—could tell, was bound to be the target of a certain amount of fortune-seeking importunity, which her situation in the national capital only served to emphasize. There it is that the friendly hand of diplomacy can most

successfully guide the impoverished bearers of ancient titles from abroad, seeking to restore their former grandeur through the aid of American dollars. And not an embassy or legation among them all but had the most minutely detailed information as to the availability and desirability of the niece and heir-ess of the Vallandingham Butworths.

There was only one obstacle in the way of the titled gold-seekers,—the girl herself. Her imperious spirit was proud of its American lineage, and she remembered, with sometimes disconcerting directness, the story of the four great-great-grandfathers, each of whom had borne a private's musket in the struggle for independence. She was not ashamed of the fact that they all had been poor men, and that the families of some of them had lingered on the pension roll of the government for many years after the close of that historic contest.

There was no appeal to her in the social position of foreign titles. She was an aristocrat in education, training, and surroundings, but a democrat in instinct and feeling. Moreover, the social life of the capital had wearied her. It had held no illusion for her clear eyes. Sitting in this room she had stripped the mask from its shams for her own edification many a time. But there had been moments, recently, when she had begun to fear that sooner or later she would succumb to what so many of her associates, if not her friends, called "the inevitable." There were times when she almost regretted that she had consented to her virtual adoption by her uncle

and aunt, or had ever received anything from their lavish hands. For although "Dear old Uncle Val," had not yet joined in the pressure upon her for an alliance with European nobility, the urgency of her aunt was so great, and increasing so rapidly, that she felt it would be but a short time before he would be persuaded to add his request.

Since her peremptory dismissal of the Earl of Ivor, a year before, her aunt had changed tactics somewhat, and from insistence on a particular alliance had descanted more generally upon the advantages to be obtained through the social position of unnamed eligibles. But recently Mrs. Butworth had again taken up an individual cause, and now was exerting herself to the utmost in behalf of a man whom Miss Lane had found even less personally attractive than the rejected Ivor.

It was the Viscount Ybarra, first secretary of the Spanish embassy, who was now pressing his ardent suit. He was a diplomat of the dashing, vivacious type, who boasted a pedigree that included the names of some of the most ancient grandees of Spain. And as a suitor he had displayed the merit of wit and address. But underneath the veneer of breeding the clear-eyed girl had detected a fraudulent soul, which neither her aunt nor any of her intimates suspected. They laughed at her delineation of the real character of the man who was always at her feet, and told her she was too imaginative and fanciful.

Ybarra's attentions had been marked by such deli-

cacy and thoughtfulness that it had surprised—and displeased—her when she found, during the interval of her visit to Europe in the late summer and fall, that she missed them. When they were renewed, immediately upon his own return from Spain, shortly after the Butworths came home, they had been reinforced so subtly by a certain quality of daring assurance that there had been occasions when she felt herself almost on the point of surrender. It had been that way only last week, on the very day of her adventure with Stewart Blake. But now all that was past, and she felt herself, with lighter heart than she had known in many a month, invigorated by a new determination.

And why? She tried to tell herself that it was the conviction of the rightness of her old judgment. But down in the depths of her heart she knew that something had buttressed up that judgment, and that something was her chance renewal of acquaintance with the man she had met but once, years ago. And there came back to her the last words she had heard him utter:

“ You remembered! ”

“ Why should I have remembered? ” she asked herself, and there was an unresented tenderness in the question. And then, with her face all rosy at the thought, “ He had remembered, too.”

Yes, he had remembered. And she knew, with no need of word from him to tell her, that there had been no time in all the interval of their two meetings when he had forgotten. She knew, too,

that he did not intend now either to forget himself or to permit her to forget. She saw already, as clearly as if he had made in form the declaration she had heard unwillingly from so many others, that the future rested with her. It was hers to say whether the fragrance of his violets that had filled her room these last few days should cease or go with her down all the long and pleasant vista that opened before her imagination. She had not seen him since the adventure in the park, though he had called twice to inquire for her. Neither time had she been able to go down.

Viscount Ybarra was playing a losing game that dismal afternoon, and he had full need of the assistance that came to his cause. A fresh stick of hickory had just been laid upon the snapping embers, and the girl, reclining in the long chair, was pleasantly contemplating the result, when a half-peremptory knock at her door prevented a resumption of her reverie. In response to her cheerful invitation to enter the resolute figure of her aunt filled the doorway.

Mrs. Butworth shivered a little, in delicate recognition of the inclemency without, as she moved over to the comfortable rocker beside the fire.

"What a wretched day!" she said. "How much it rains in Washington!"

The girl gazed at the little flames beginning to curl up around the new wood, and made no reply.

"Mooning, my dear?" queried her aunt.

"No, Aunt Jane," answered the girl. And then, as if reproaching herself for a slight equivocation: "Perhaps I was building a few castles."

Mrs. Butworth fetched a portentous sigh. "In Spain, Helen?" she asked, with a solicitude in her voice meant to imply a world of tenderness. "How romantic!"

The words were like a challenge to her niece.

"Not in Spain, Aunt Jane," said Helen, quickly, and there was definitive accent in the reply which gave the older woman warning that a decision had been reached.

Perhaps the girl caught the slight stiffening of her aunt's firm lips and realized its import, for she added briskly:

"At least if they were in Spain they are all burned down. They were built of flame."

"The flame of devotion burns many years, dear Helen." Mrs. Butworth was very near a simper in her endeavor to invest her tender platitude with its intended significance.

"Sometimes," responded the girl, a little wearily. "But oftener, I'm afraid, not many days."

"Don't be cynical, Helen," returned the practical Mrs. Butworth. "You know Viscount Ybarra is devotion itself."

"Ah, Ybarra again," murmured her niece. "Yes, I know. A devotion all sugared words and hand on heart; all dreamy eyes and black mustache." Her voice was very near to scorn.

Mrs. Butworth had come to seek,—to demand, if

necessary,—a final acquiescence in her plan for Helen's marriage to Ybarra. She had reached the zenith of social progress in Washington, and her heart was set on a campaign abroad that should fill with bitterest envy the breasts of some of her amiable antagonists at home. Since her niece had rejected the opportunity at the British court she was determined that this providential opening at Madrid should not be permitted to pass unaccepted. And she had nerved herself to exert a pressure that even she would have detested not so very long before. But she meant to exhaust the resources of persuasion before employing those of authority.

"My dear, you pain me," she began, in a tone of as much affection as she could command. "It shocks me to think you could so misunderstand a man like Viscount Ybarra."

"I am afraid it is not I who misunderstand, auntie dear," replied the girl, gently. "It is because I understand him that I distrust him."

She braced herself reluctantly for what she saw would become a contest of will unless she could avert it. She was not ready to meet the crisis yet, and did not want it to come to the final word. In her heart she had made the decision, but not even to this woman who had been a second mother to her was she willing yet to disclose the truth. Nevertheless, she would not attempt to dissimulate where Ybarra was concerned.

Mrs. Butworth leaned back in her chair and waited, silent. She was at a loss how to proceed.

Duelling with words was not her forte when serious matters were at issue, although in the light fencing over social affairs she was an adept. The deepness with which this matter touched her clogged her usual facility of expression. She was struggling now for the gratification of her dearest ambition, and she wished most earnestly to make good her cause, yet feared to mar it by mistaken importunity.

"There is one whom I confess I do not understand," she said, at length, "and that is you, my dear. Here is offered to you everything that makes most girls of your age and station happiest. You would be assured a position such as none of your friends has secured, and with it the devotion of a man who, as all Washington knows, is even now your slave. You——"

"Disinherit me, Aunt Jane," interrupted the girl, "and see how quickly the slave would be emancipated."

A bright flush touched the cheeks of the older woman. "Don't be foolish, Helen," she returned, and though she strove to conceal it there was a touch of asperity in her tone. "You must know that it is not money Viscount Ybarra is after. He comes of one of the oldest and noblest families of Spain, a family of the greatest wealth. You have only to meet and talk with him to know that there is nothing mercenary in him. But if there were, it is only what many another girl has done."

"And regretted," put in Helen, quickly.

"Your uncle will settle on you a sum that will

make you always independent," went on Mrs. Butworth, ignoring the interruption. "If we choose to follow the European custom and give Ybarra a *dot* with you, why should you find objection?" She paused, then added, lamely: "When you're in Rome, you must do as the Romans do, you know, dear."

The girl laughed lightly. "The answer to that, dear auntie," she cried, "is not to go to Rome."

She rose from her chair, and still limping in honor of the wrenched knee, moved over to her aunt. Seating herself on the broad arm of the chair she threw her arms around Mrs. Butworth and with a flood of caresses stopped the pleading and argument she felt she could no longer resist without peril. She was not ordinarily demonstrative, and this sudden effusiveness was mistaken by her aunt as the preliminary of confession and consent. The older woman thrilled with pleasant anticipations of the future. With the girl's head upon her shoulder, she gazed silently into the fire and began the erection of her own castles in Spain.

To them, sitting thus, came a servant bearing a card on a silver tray. Mrs. Butworth glanced at it and exclaimed with pleasure.

"Helen, dear, it is Viscount Ybarra! You will go down?" She turned toward the window and saw that the storm was over. The sky had cleared, and the afternoon sun threw a broad beam athwart the room. "Look, dear!" she exclaimed, "the sun is out. It is a good omen for us!"

The girl roused herself with evident effort. An

instant she hesitated, but in that instant she saw in her aunt's face such hope and joy that it was not in her heart to dash it by refusal. "Another time," she told herself. "It need not be to-day."

"Yes, Aunt Jane," she said, gently, and moved slowly to the door.

CHAPTER V

SPAIN SUFFERS A REVERSAL

THE soft rays of the afternoon sun percolated dreamily through the dainty web of Arabian laces and filled the Butworth drawing-room with a pale, restful half-light. Viscount Ybarra, darkly handsome, slender and graceful of figure, well-poised and nonchalant, the very type of southern aristocracy, strolled leisurely about the spacious apartment and examined with dilettante interest this or that curio or object of art scattered about with studied carelessness. Matters had been going very well with him lately, and he was pleased to think that his fortunate star was in the ascendant. There had been a smoothness in the great game of diplomacy he was playing all by himself that at times had almost made him suspect an even smoother game on the part of his antagonists. The fickle goddess was certainly smiling on him and his sessions at the green cloth-covered tables had ended with his pockets jingling. But one thing more was needed to round out his successes, and he was telling himself now that he should win that this afternoon.

"I shall reverse the proverb," he murmured twirling the ends of his black mustache, "luck in cards and love both."

It was a noble room where he waited for Miss

Lane, one that bespoke in every feature the skill and taste of its mistress. The lofty ceiling had been done by that famous artist whose work in the most beautiful of the public buildings of the capital had made him a name among the great men of the world. In perfect harmony with it was the subdued splendor of the Gobelin draped walls. This was that "tapestry drawing-room" so glibly described by the perambulating city guides, some of whom had divided many an honest eagle with the punctilious summer caretakers who thus helped to swell a modest bank account when the Butworths were away from Washington.

The Spaniard moved daintily about, his boot heels recording hardly a click on the polished inlaid floor. The sense of luxury was grateful to him, the incense of great wealth filled his nostrils. He paused by a curiously carved teakwood stand and examined with the zest of a connoisseur an exquisite little vase, the great triumph of the often triumphant Kozan. For the moment his genuine pleasure got the better of his trained enthusiasm, and he did not detect the soft swish of silk as Helen Lane passed through the heavy portières and entered the room.

A strong self-sufficiency radiated subtly from the complacent young man as he scrutinized the vase. It struck the girl almost as an air of proprietorship. She paused to watch him, her instinct of distrust roused suddenly to positive antagonism. That moment's respite gave her the poise she needed for the encounter which she apprehended would not be al-

together pleasant. The advantage of initiative was hers.

"You like my little beauty, Viscount?" she asked, and there was such calm sincerity in her voice that not even her aunt, well versed in her moods, could have detected that it was forced.

Ybarra started as if caught in the very act of attempting to pocket the prize. He had been more deeply absorbed in its examination than he liked to admit to himself was discreet. But instantly he was all smiles.

"Ah, Miss Lane." He took a few steps toward her, head bent gallantly, and daintily squeezed the fingertips held out in formal welcome. "Indeed, beauty, wherever it may deign to charm the eye, is bound to be the object of profound homage," supplementing his stilted words with a flash of the eyes that could not fail to mark a personal meaning.

The faint flush that promptly suffused Helen's face, no less than her look of well-bred surprise, confirmed his own more or less distinct notion that his start had been none of the happiest, and he hastened to add, smoothly: "I called to assure myself of your complete recovery from your recent accident."

"Why, it was nothing serious, Viscount—not at all a matter of consequence. I have quite recovered, thank you," she answered with cold simplicity. "I expect to resume riding in a few days."

"You are very fond of horses?" he ventured, casually.

"I like fresh air, and that is my favorite means of enjoying it. You don't ride much, Viscount?"

"Rarely,—though I could be tempted. My time is so much taken up with engagements of all sorts, and then,—the winter climate here—" he raised his brows deprecatingly, and halted, as if the subject were really too delicate to say more about it.

"Open air and diplomacy never agree well, I presume?"

"Some say, Miss Lane, that shirt-sleeve diplomacy in swivel chairs is quite popular here. But," he added flippantly, "imagine the revered Secretary of State on a prancing thoroughbred, gravely discussing a weighty problem of international comity!"

"Altogether you prefer the drawing-room," she observed, with a half-smile.

Ybarra shrugged his shoulders. "Part of my agreeable duties," he smiled back. "The drawing-room is a most essential auxiliary."

"And the delicious opportunities for small talk over a cup of tea? Yes, I understand your preference."

"Quite so, Miss Lane, quite so. An afternoon visit has its peculiar advantages—sometimes,"—a fleeting glimmer of very white teeth under his mustache,—“if the opportunities are not carelessly permitted to slip.” And he indulged in a very low, very well-mannered, very self-satisfied little laugh, as if to emphasize that of all men he must not be expected to overlook any valuable chance that fortune might bestow.

Helen nodded: "Opportunities to talk about picture dances, winnings at bridge, the next bachelors' cotillon, precious morsels of gossip—wouldn't it be grievous to miss them?"

"Why not? All such pretty frivolities help to make life pleasant—you simply adjust yourself to your environment. If you chance upon responsive spirits the scope naturally widens,"—a suspicion of a sneer,—“literature,—art——”

"You are *connaissanceur*, Viscount Ybarra? Indeed, I had no idea——"

"*Connaissanceur?*"—a gesture of exaggerated modesty—"I do not aspire to such dizzy heights."

"A devotee to art, then, I should say?"

"In a way, perhaps, yes," Ybarra affirmed, carelessly, "purely a matter of emotion, though. A little art is a very nice thing,—*pour la bonne bouche.*"

"You collect?"

"Not seriously. I merely pick up little things at random, a trifle here or there——"

"I see," Helen observed, with a passing side-glance at the dainty piece of Japanese work on the teakwood stand.

Ybarra followed her eyes and smiled broadly. "No, no, Miss Lane! I had no wicked designs on your favorite Kozan. I admired that exquisite piece without ulterior motives. A fascinating little thing, really. One rarely meets with a specimen so perfect in color and texture."

"Then I wasn't wrong, after all? You *are* *connaissanceur* of ceramics."

"No fads or specialties. Simply a laudable desire to gratify my love of the beautiful. I accomplish that most thoroughly by acquiring the specimens which arouse my admiration."

"That is selfish!"

"But perfectly natural, don't you think?"

"Love for art should be impersonal."

"Impersonal, Miss Lane?" deprecated Ybarra, "You can hardly mean that. Love for things beautiful is an intensely personal sentiment. You could not make that impersonal without destroying your own individuality."

"Not destroy it,—curb it,—restrain it."

"That is something I have never attempted and never expect to," returned Ybarra, decisively.

"But doesn't it occur to you, at times, that that is what a man ought to do?" she asked, sweetly.

"A man?" Her emphasis on the word struck him curiously.

"Yes, a man," Helen repeated with some insistence.

"Indeed, I beg to differ with you, Miss Lane. I regard personality as the highest expression of Nature's creative power. Why spoil it?"

The girl did not answer at once, but gazed beyond him into the fading glow of the winter afternoon, now gradually dimming into mellow twilight. Ybarra went on, pointedly: "It seems to me a man ought to accentuate his personality instead of trying to eliminate it."

"And ride rough-shod over the rest of the world?"

"Miss Lane,"—with a superior smile,—“if I am not greatly mistaken, you have no sympathy to waste on those who are content to trail in the wake of events. I have often availed myself of the opportunity to analyze your predilections——”

"Your interest in me is extremely flattering, Viscount," she interposed, quickly. "Undoubtedly you devote a similar study to all the various sorts of personalities that cross your path?" Her tone was perceptibly cool.

"No, no!" he protested, with simulated horror. "Not all sorts! I discriminate. My research is confined to the most perfect form."

"Indeed?"

"Divine beauty in human form," accompanying the words with a little movement of the forefinger and thumb as if he were tossing her the tiniest imaginary nosegay, very delicately, very primly.

"And all the rest is consigned to hopeless oblivion?"

"The dissection of mere character simply aims to uncover the faults of others with a view to utilizing them. Appreciation of Beauty involves a devotional cult, for Beauty unquestionably confers an inestimable boon on mankind simply by being beautiful."

"A philosophy which draws very delicate lines of demarcation, Señor Ybarra."

"Mankind ought to have some sort of philosophy, don't you think? And this brand should be very

acceptable," he laughed. "But," lowering his voice to an ardent whisper, "the acknowledgment of such an abstract theory in no way precludes the practical desire on the part of mankind to possess the adored object." A deeper meaning than the words conveyed lived in the sparkle of his eyes.

"Priceless curios,"—she emphasized rather precisely,—“may not always be so easily obtained as the art-loving theorist would wish——”

"Curios?"

"—and I can understand," she went on, disregarding his air of surprise, "how vexing it must be to suffer disappointment. One should sympathize with the disillusioned collector." There was a trifling catch in her voice, like merriment suppressed. But their talk had veered around dangerously close to personal lines, and now she observed, with studied soberness: "Ceramics are a great study in themselves."

"Ceramics!" he raised his brows in mild reproach. "Oh, yes, certainly, but we——"

"Had started discussing *les beaux arts*, principally ceramics. Certainly." A delightfully mischievous shimmer in her eyes, scarcely veiled by the exquisite lashes. "I dare say you add constantly to that collection during your travels?"

Disconcerted, but discreet, Ybarra followed reluctantly the deft twist his fair antagonist had given their talk.

"Hm, yes," he observed, politely indifferent, "but there is no system about it, save that of inconsist-

ency. I abhor rules, catalogues, and well-regulated methods. An object strikes my fancy and I naturally strive to acquire it. Nothing more!" A shrug. "You should see that collection! Any judicious expert would grieve at the incongruous jumble which fills the old castle at Villalosa." Then, eagerly: "You should devote some of your travel to Spain, Miss Lane!"

"Spain? I suppose so. But I have lacked the opportunity. When my aunt goes to Europe she follows no untrodden paths."

"Yet Spain is a country well worth while, Miss Lane. Quaint, romantic, very attractive in its ancient simplicity, and crowded with proud reminiscences of the past. Really a charming place to live,—among the Select." Then a moment's hesitation, as if he expected a reply. None forthcoming he continued slowly: "At the same time I am forced to admit that in many respects it stands in need of some process of modernizing,"—a suave, insinuating bow,—“a task full of promise, if a practical American mind should undertake it. I believe it would appeal to you."

"Which? The country, or the process of modernizing it?" she asked in careless innocence, for once off her guard. Her remark seemed inconsequential enough, but the instant the words had passed her lips she realized the chance she had afforded him and a vivid tint flitted over her cheeks.

"Both, Miss Lane," came Ybarra's answer, with a snap. "My country would interest you immensely,

I am certain. And knowing it well you would learn to appreciate it. No such incessant turmoil as confronts one everywhere in America; life flows evenly in pleasant channels amidst refined surroundings."

"An existence with a drift toward somnolence eventually ending in dissolution from sheer lassitude."

"Not at all!" he retorted eagerly, "not at all! Life in our ancient castles is not by any means as dreary as you may imagine. There are the hunts and other social pastimes, and——"

"The family ghosts in lonesome corridors, and the dungeons with their horrors in the bargain."

Ybarra laughed. "Perhaps I deserve that. I fear I am too intensely fond of my own world. But,"—more seriously,— "the season at Court? I believe you would find that attractive. Most Americans do."

"I can't say I ever felt any desire for ceremonial pomp. I am spoilt by our American home life. It suits me perfectly. Perhaps I am an exception," she added, reflectively.

"Undeniably," he confirmed, "in many ways, and every single one of them adorable!"

"Still their combination challenges criticism?" The touch of sarcasm made her lips curl almost imperceptibly.

Ybarra twisted the ends of his mustache amusedly. His glance rested with admiration upon the symmetrical lines of her proud face and the dainty curvature of the dimpled chin. Very racy, he thought,

to himself. How that expression of firmness and decision heightens the effect of her simple sweetness!

"Miss Lane, you are a very strange girl," he observed deliberately.

"Strange! Why?" Her eyes met his in ready defiance. She resented his presumption in assuming an attitude of familiarity not warranted by any encouragement on her part.

His amused twinkle became tinged with insolence. "Pray forgive my thoughtless observation. It came so natural. Really you are vastly different from others in your set. You do not derive pleasure from frothy nothings, or revel in platitudes like the rest. You are candid, courageous, masterful——"

"It is very good of you to say so," Helen interrupted hurriedly, to forestall any further thoughtless observations. "I am simply accustomed to follow my own inclinations, and it has not occurred to me that I ought to fashion myself after the pattern of others." Her tone implied a challenge which Ybarra perfectly understood. He parried by aggravating the offense.

"No one appreciates strong individualities more than I do," he said, slowly. "Your temperament and mine should harmonize wonderfully."

Again resentment welled up within her, more forcefully than before. She felt her dislike for him grow until his insolent amiability became almost unbearable. She did not answer. Ybarra, however, convinced of his own superiority, carelessly accepted

her silence as the natural manifestation of girlish timidity. He went on chatting pleasantly of country life in Spain, the immense forests with their hunting lodges, in the north, sunlit vineyards, the magnificent castle surrounded by vast estates.

"I have often thought," he continued, "how admirably American girls would fit into the rôle of chatelaine. What do you think, Miss Lane? Imagine yourself,"—he smiled meaningly—"I am sure the humble peasantry would worship you as an angel of light descended from Heaven to ease their burdens." His hand rested on the small table before him and he contemplated her with an air of expectant assurance.

The slight upward inflection in his voice aroused her to apprehension. "I enjoy travel in foreign countries," she replied, coolly, "but simply as a casual spectator. As an uplifter of an unfortunate peasantry, anywhere, I should be a decided failure."

Ybarra's brows contracted unpleasantly at the rebuff but he returned doggedly to his line of attack. "I cannot claim to be much of an uplifter myself," he said with forced good humor. "But you know, Miss Lane, in my country, where the great lords are looked up to by the lower classes, the chatelaine of a castle figures as the natural dispenser of charitable largess. That is one of the attributes of rank, one of its obligations."

"Rank?" Helen moved her shoulders slightly. "I have never troubled myself about it. Rank and titles have no attraction for me."

"I can understand that," he replied, nodding knowingly, "great wealth insures an independence which even crowned heads may envy. All the same——"

"Wealth? I did not mean it that way," she interrupted, sharply. "The question of money and the things it buys is wholly secondary."

"With you," he emphasized, "naturally. You have no call to trouble about that—it is ever at your service. Yet, would it not startle you, to say the least, if by any chance you should find yourself some day without those luxuries which are a matter of course to you now?"

"In your judgment wealth is of overweening importance, Viscount. Am I right?" There was a disdainful note in her question.

"It is the means of acquiring power. Great rank is power itself. Wealth is the most potent power producer in our modern civilization. Both combined spell invincibility," he answered tersely.

Then abruptly he bent forward, his elbows braced against the arms of his chair, his face lit up with sudden determination.

"Miss Lane," he said, in a voice suddenly grown tense, "in the natural course of events I shall succeed my father in the dukedom of Villalosa, earlier or later. My rank will be of the most exalted in my country, second to none but the sovereign. Miss Lane, I ask you to share it with me!"—bursting into passionate fervor—"I love you, Helen! I ask you to be my wife!"

The girl paled and shrank back, startled by his sudden aggressiveness.

"Me?" her voice almost failed, "I presume—my uncle's wealth——"

All along her desire to prevent an intimate turn in their talk had persisted, but now the crisis could not be avoided. She rose. Reluctant, and inwardly trembling, yet bravely candid, she would meet him on his own ground.

"Let me be frank with you, Viscount Ybarra,"—her voice calm, not a tremor betraying the tumult within,—"I had hoped you would spare me this painful situation. I have tried to make it clear to you—in various ways—I hoped you would understand—I could not care for you that way—to marry you——" She took a deep breath.

"Not care? Ah! I comprehend. There is someone else?" Fierce jealousy shone in his strained features, and the words spurted brusquely from his lips, his voice aquiver with excitement. "I—I have to stand back—because you are in love with another?" An ugly gleam in his brooding eyes.

The girl sustained his glance with proud disdain. "You have no right to say that," she answered, coldly. "I do not—cannot—love you."

"Ah!" An exultant expression swept over his swarthy face. "No rival whom you love?" he exclaimed impetuously. "Helen, dearest, then give me my chance! No woman ever loves unless her love is awakened by a man's wooing. I adore you!

I worship the ground hallowed by the tread of your foot. I love you as never man loved woman. I can make you care for me—love me. My devotion, my persistence will be without bounds—I will woo you and win you—give me my chance!”

He pleaded with almost ferocious fervor, as though some tremendous elementary force had uncontrollably broken forth within him and now madly rushed on, overpowering, resistless.

Strangely excited by this onrush of passion, Helen faltered. For one instant a seething sensation set her every fiber aflame, but in its wake came an icy reaction that benumbed her senses almost to the point of fainting. But her will controlled, and the next moment she had recovered a semblance of conventional composure; outwardly, at least.

“I can give you no hope.” She spoke in a strained low voice, yet her tone was unyielding. “It is impossible!”

“Im-possible?” Ybarra accentuated, mechanically, loath to trust his ears. Then slowly, gradually, there came an amazing change in his manner. The tension of his muscles relaxed and the drawn lines in his face faded away. He had risen, and with head slightly bent forward and eyelids half shut, he regarded her with cynical assurance, viciously handsome, like a snake coiled to strike. All sign of tenderness was gone, and only menace lurked in his attitude.

“I cannot accept your decision as final. I will

trust to time,—to your admirable good sense, Miss Lane,—and the support of your estimable aunt, Mrs. Butworth.”

His voice was smooth, and he bowed with faultless courtesy, very much as though she had regretfully declined an invitation to a theater party and he were expressing the hope that he might have the pleasure some other evening.

“Aunt Jane is my dearest friend, Viscount Ybarra,” replied the girl. “She would not insist upon influencing me against my inclinations,” with a lofty bend of the head which definitely indicated his dismissal.

But Ybarra chose to ignore this signal for his *congé*. It was not his habit to accept defeat when there still promised any chance to win, be it ever so remote. Flattery had been of no avail. The allurements of social eminence had proved a useless bait. A passionate appeal had met with obdurate frigidity. No matter. Where directness failed deviousness might succeed. He had some very well-defined ideas about human nature; girls’ notions didn’t count for much anyway. His mind was made up that this splendid creature should be his own, and conventional conceit as to what *noblesse oblige* meant did not figure in his calculations. It never had!

“Your dearest friend, undoubtedly”—he stroked his mustache and nodded superciliously, all the time observing her furtively from the corners of his veiled eyes—“and I hope you are as good a friend of hers.

I cherish the most genuine regard for Mrs. Butworth—kiss the hand,”—suiting the action to the words he touched his fingertips lightly to his lips—“at all events, you and I, Miss Lane, should understand each other excellently.” He spoke as if the last five minutes had been completely blotted out from his memory.

Helen stopped him with a curt gesture. With head averted she had stood silently, her slender white fingers playing listlessly with a cluster of long-stemmed roses, gorgeously fragrant, on the table before her. Her impatient hope that he would take his leave had not been fulfilled. Now she turned and looked him full in the face.

“It is idle to pursue this theme any further, Señor Ybarra,” she said firmly. “My answer must be accepted as final.”

“Nothing is final but death, my dear Miss Lane,” Ybarra persisted, with an impudent smile, in no way abashed and without showing the least trace of resentment. “Patience is a wonderful thing, and desires are nourished by delay. The question of an alliance such as I had the honor to propose to you is capable of being discussed from conventional viewpoints, and Mrs. Butworth——”

“My aunt, Viscount Ybarra——”

“A lady of unlimited circumspection,” he continued, with blandest assurance, “deeply concerned for your future happiness, and incidentally for her own——”

“Señor Ybarra, I cannot permit,—you will oblige

me——” she found some difficulty in choosing her words.

“—which you would not willingly jeopardize. Of course not,” Ybarra concluded his sentence calmly.

“Jeopardize?” A hot wave of anger flushed her cheeks. His impudence dazed her so completely that for a moment she had no reply.

Ybarra nodded with perfect equanimity. “Mrs. Butworth has a most commendable ambition to enhance the luster of her social eminence—or, let us say, to maintain her present standing at least,” he observed, deliberately.

“No one can question that,” Helen retorted, almost breathlessly.

“Question?” with a shrug. “Miss Lane, many things can be questioned by envious and meddlesome social rivals. Ladies of the world have casual secrets,—petty and insignificant, to be sure. Small weaknesses that could be exaggerated and distorted into indiscretions by persons so disposed, and society is unduly sensitive about other people’s affairs.” The lurking suggestion of menace had grown almost to positive threat.

“Aunt Jane?” The girl whitened, her hands clenching and relaxing. “Viscount Ybarra, you——”

“Mrs. Butworth’s devoted friend—and your humble servant, Miss Lane.”

Helen wanted to speak, to question him, but the words seemed to congeal on her unmoving lips. A horrible feeling of apprehension held her captive.

Suddenly there was a soft swishing movement of the heavy silken folds at the farther end of the room. A servant appearing in the door held back the portières with pompous effort, and announced stiffly:

“Her Grace, the Lady Edgethorne.”

CHAPTER VI

LADY SARAH INVESTIGATES

A TALL, willowy figure, the acme of aristocratic elegance, swept gracefully into the drawing-room and greeted Helen with a friendly nod, holding out a daintily gloved hand: "My dear girl, *so* glad to see you," and as though now for the first time she became aware of the young diplomat's presence, "ah, indeed, Viscount Ybarra, quite a charming coincidence," indicating her recognition of the Viscount by a slight formal bend of the head. "I hope I do not interrupt confidences?"

With a sigh of relief Helen welcomed the visitor. "Lady Sarah, I am delighted. How good of you to come!" she said, impulsively, pressing the proffered hand with uncommon warmth.

The welcome was so thoroughly convincing that Lady Edgethorne's expression became just the least bit uncharitable. Without requiring particular elucidation her nimble mind realized at once that Helen hailed her as a deliverer from an annoying, if not an anxious, quarter of an hour.

"A cup of tea and a minute's chat, my dear. That's what I dropped in for. I am not over-exacting, you see." She glanced cheerfully around, apparently without any special purpose. "How perfectly comfortable, this cozy twilight. No, no, don't,

please, Helen!" as the girl pressed an ivory button flooding the room with a soft light from a cluster of tiny electric bulbs. "Really, it was not so *very* dark. And your dear aunt? She is not at home? I certainly hoped to see Mrs. Butworth. She is so perfectly lovely, and,"—Lady Sarah seemed to be having trouble unbuttoning her gloves,—“so discreet.”

Helen was too much gratified by the providential arrival of the visitor to catch the delicate modulation of Lady Edgethorne's voice in greeting Ybarra, or the pointed references to Mrs. Butworth's absence and the cozy twilight.

"I hope you are not going to limit your stay to *one* minute," she said, pleasantly, "let me take your furs. Aunt Jane will drop in presently for her tea. She had some pressing letters to write. You know"—Helen's manner grew more natural,—“auntie always has some urgent correspondence to attend to after luncheon. You certainly must stay until she comes down.”

The girl's imploring glance confirmed Lady Sarah's first diagnosis of the situation. My Lady's discerning and alert intuition seldom misled her. Here she scented a delicious morsel of gossip, and her mind was made up; no power on earth could drive her away until she had unraveled this mystery.

"How perfectly amiable of you, Helen. I felt so lonely at home and was beginning to hate myself, so I just *had* to run over." With circumstantial

complaisance she divested herself of sable cape and gloves and settled comfortably down in a soft-cushioned chair for an extended siege. "Guess whom I encountered walking up Connecticut Avenue? You have met our latest distinguished addition to the Corps?"

Helen looked up inquiringly and shook her head. "I can't imagine——"

"The *Chevalier Triste* from the Carpathian regions?" drawled Ybarra, who up to that time had remained a silent but amused observer, simply acknowledging Lady Sarah's nonchalant greeting by an elaborate bow.

"Prince Kropatchek, certainly," said Lady Sarah. "Have you met him, Helen? He does remind me so wonderfully of that impressive etching by Claude Mellan representing the martyred Saviour on the cloth of St. Veronica."

"Bound to play havoc with the belles of the season," mocked Ybarra, "such an imposing figure! The walking illustration of the first principles in geometry,—all straight lines and angles."

"I believe Prince Kropatchek has called," replied Helen, quietly, to Lady Edgethorne, ignoring the Viscount's scoffing remarks, "but I happened to be out."

Ybarra's words grated on her ears, his persistence disgusted her. Lady Edgethorne's arrival would have afforded him an excellent opportunity for withdrawing, yet he remained. She could not comprehend it. In addition to all else it proved such a

decided lack of *savoir faire*. But she concluded that the only thing for her to do was to tolerate him.

"Kropatchek arrived only a few weeks ago," Lady Sarah went on gossiping, "but even in that astonishingly short time a really touching attachment has sprung up between him and the Ambassador. Lord Florian and the Prince have some mutual acquaintances in Vienna, and,"—that uncharitable twitching played again around Lady Sarah's pretty mouth—"it must be so uncommonly gratifying to the Ambassador that the dear Prince bows as profoundly to his Country Curate's daughter as if she came from royal lineage. How perfectly absurd some people's notions are!"

Lady Edgethorne's pet grievance, that a country curate's daughter, simply because she happened to be married to an ambassador recently raised to a peerage, should outrank socially the granddaughter of the Duke of Boneset, cropped out at every turn. And the ducal granddaughter never let slip an opportunity to vent her spite by administering little pinpricks to the plain and unoffending Ambadress herself, or scattering among her circle of acquaintances spicy and wicked little references to the humble and perfectly unpretentious origin of *some* people.

"Be charitable, Lady Edgethorne," scoffed the Viscount. "Such notions may be indigenous to the Carpathian mountains, and your dear Prince probably spent most of his existence contemplating that attractive scenery."

Lady Sarah pouted superciliously. "They tell

me real fairy tales of the ancient castle which represents the remnant of the Kropatchek domains. It must be a curious medieval affair. A few antiquated towers, some half in ruins, with any number of bats and owls and things, presided over by the widowed old Princess."

"Vast estates, of course?" sneered Ybarra. "Our dear friend makes such a decidedly rural impression."

"With the exception of some sheep pastures most of the land has succumbed to mortgages, I am told," Lady Sarah chatted on, while a noiseless servant brought a tray with tea things, which he placed before Helen. "And so they have to economize very carefully. But in one of those ghostly towers the old Princess hoards the most gorgeous accumulation of gold and silver plate, worth the ransom of kings. Dining off gruel, served on heavy silver dishes by servants in sheepskins, the Princess has obstinately refused to sell any of the precious vessels, many of which date back to the times of the old Polish kings. I dare say," My Lady added, with a suspicion of malice, "she awaits serenely the revival of the ancient Kropatchek splendor and the perpetuation of the Kropatchek race through her dearest only son's happy union with an American *millardeuse*."

"A Gruel-Prince of ancient race on a modern fishing expedition," commented Ybarra, with stagy pathos. "Are the goldfish biting, Lady Edgethorne?"

"Aren't you in touch, Viscount?" came the counter question, very sweetly.

"Not exactly," he answered, with ostentatious indifference.

"Indeed? I thought you might be able to tell," observed Lady Sarah, with a gracious smile. "As a rule you are so well informed." She glanced casually at Helen who was busily pouring tea: "Closed season, just now, I presume?"

"Wouldn't it be preferable to defer to the expert opinion of the amiable Shepherd-Prince?" Ybarra suggested softly.

"Never mind shepherd-princes, Viscount!" Lady Sarah's voice assumed a peculiarly metallic tinge. "Plenty of others in the same boat. At any rate, when the ancient Kropatcheks thrived patriarchally on their neighbors' sheep, other people amused themselves by scorching Moors in Spanish boots. But Helen, dear, I am nearly perishing for a sip of tea. Thank you, just a slice of lemon," as Helen handed her a cup. Then turning to Ybarra, pithily: "Really, I'm not so sure that I shouldn't prefer a sheep-stealing ancestor."

Ybarra stirred his cup lazily. "Rare truth from lovely lips! Delightful."

"No greater delight than to supply the rare article to those who appreciate it, Viscount."

"The carelessness of my lamented ancestors is most deplorable," laughed Ybarra, "but I beg to point out in my favor that there has been no scorching for a few centuries."

"No telling what may happen when the germ is in the blood."

"Am I to infer that Lady Edgethorne believes in atavism or reincarnation?"

A complacent nod greeted this sally. "The belief may be warranted in *some* cases," she replied.

"Still I could not be persuaded," observed the Viscount, in most dulcet tone, "that, for instance, the first Duke of Boneset, Richard Gloucester's relentless partisan, would commit the unpardonable mistake of attempting remanifestation in the sweet temperament of Lady Edgethorne."

"Your analytical mind seems to incline to applied history," retorted Lady Sarah, bristling up.

"My Lady's power of penetration is divine, the intuitive feminine mind coming into its own."

"You have made a specialty of studying the feminine mind? Pray don't hesitate to enlighten us further."

"Ah," replied Ybarra, with a suave gesture, "a woman's mind is at best a mystery."

"And at worst?"

"Chaos!" he chuckled.

"Into which the master minds of creation vainly strive to instill order?" asked Lady Sarah, her lip curling.

"Occasionally the temptation would be irresistible."

"But as a rule?"

"Self-effacement to dare."

"Viscount, your gallantry is simply overwhelming," remarked Lady Sarah with icy precision.

"Truly, truly, a spectacle for gods!" exclaimed

a sonorous, jovial voice, as a round, clean-shaven face, not unlike a jolly full moon, appeared between the heavy portières. Then a portly figure emerged. "A spectacle for gods! Minerva and Mercury in fearful battle array,—if you will pardon this near-classical thought from one of the 'master minds of creation,' Lady Sarah? And how are you, my dear Helen? *Su servidor, Señor Vizconde.*"

"Senator Fairmount, how lovely of you!" Helen arose vivaciously to greet the new arrival.

"Hmh! 'Senator Fairmount,' is it?" repeated the portly gentleman, shuffling laboriously toward the tea-table, like a cumbersome piece of machinery. "Very formal nowadays, what, Helen? Used to be 'Uncle Steve' in old times, when I happened to fetch a box of candy for the little girl, hey?"

Helen blushed. "I have not seen you for so long, not since we returned from abroad,—and I am so glad to see you now," she added illogically, in a half apologetic tone.

"Yes, I must come some evening and get acquainted again," as he fondled her outstretched hand between his pudgy fingers. "What, little girl? We'll have a real cozy chat like old times,—and some candy?"

"And so you have been eavesdropping, Senator Fairmount? Horrible! I was persuaded that men never did such things!" Lady Sarah made a *moue* at him, like a spoiled child, but held out her hand gracefully.

"I plead guilty, Lady Sarah. But who could

have helped it? The controversy was so entertaining!" Turning to Ybarra: "Viscount, I am bound to award the palm of victory to Minerva," he added, jocularly.


"We shall generously overlook your failings in view of your chivalrous explanation, Senator," remarked Lady Edgethorne.

"Delightful," said the Senator, having promptly dispatched the dainty cup of tea offered by Helen. "But, my dear," addressing her, "I merely blew in to see your uncle on a matter of business. He has gone to the club, so I'm told, and if you will pardon me I must continue my meteoric flight through space to seek Butworth in the somber shades of the Metropolitan,—sorry to leave this bright spot!"

"How convenient for men to have business when they want a pretext for getting away," complained Lady Edgethorne. "I had always counted on you as a reliable ladies' man, Senator Fairmount. How mistaken one can be!" She glanced at the Senator in a whimsically patronizing way. "Tell me, is it bridge, or poker?"

Fairmount laughed heartily. "My dear Lady Edgethorne, neither bridge nor poker could induce me to forsake such attractive company. It happens to be real business this time,—a little matter pending in the Senate in which Butworth is interested."

Viscount Ybarra pricked up his ears and arose nonchalantly. "I should esteem it a distinguished privilege to accompany you a little way, Senator. I am due at the French embassy shortly," he said, con-



sulting his watch. "Will Miss Lane graciously permit?"

"You gentlemen insist on leaving us entirely to our own resources," said Helen. A slight inflection in her voice lent her words the semblance of a question, but she made no pretense of detaining them.

"Of course, we mourn our loss," Lady Sarah chimed in sweetly, glancing casually at Helen, "but we shall try to worry along in our own small way, between mystery and chaos, as best we may."

The Viscount acknowledged the parting shot with a sarcastic bow, and the two men made their *adieux*.

"Clever vixen, but charming, very charming!" remarked Senator Fairmount to the Viscount when they had left the Butworth mansion and were wending their way toward Connecticut Avenue.

"As charming as the point of a Toledo blade inserted under the fifth rib," assented Ybarra, dryly, as they walked on.

Unconsciously Helen heaved a deep sigh when the two men were gone.

"Is it so very serious?" inquired Lady Sarah, glancing shrewdly at her, head just a little tilted to one side.

Helen turned and gave an embarrassed little laugh. "I am glad he is gone," she said, flushing.

"He?" Lady Sarah queried, very innocently. "I thought you and Senator Fairmount were the best of friends."

A deeper crimson suffused Helen's face. "The

Viscount, of course," she murmured, with an imperceptible tremor, trying hard to look unconcerned.

"Ybarra?" The semblance of surprise depicted in Lady Sarah's features was consummate perfection. "Why, my dear, you seemed to be on *very* cordial terms with him."

"Cordial!" There was a note of genuine abhorrence in Helen's tone. "Good heavens! Don't say that,—I detest him!"

"Inde-ed? You surprise me." The subtlest twinkle in My Lady's eyes. "That cozy *tête-à-tête* when I came in,—I naturally supposed——"

"He is a monster!" exclaimed Helen, excitedly, the tears almost starting.

"Monster? This animated fashion-plate done in sepia a m-monst-er?" Lady Sarah burst into a ripple of melodious laughter so suddenly, so irresistibly, that Helen caught the infection against her will and both were carried away by a wave of merriment.

Then came a moment of soberness, the inevitable sequel to excessive hilarity.

"Helen, you take him far too seriously," said Lady Edgethorne.

"Too seriously?" Helen shook her head. "You don't know him. That man is thoroughly wicked. He has no conscience."

"I am afraid," returned Lady Sarah, quizzically, "his conscience is slightly tarnished from lack of use, but remember his diplomatic training. Really, it isn't as bad as you think."

Helen burst out: "Why, he had the assurance to ——" She halted and looked down in confusion.

"Oh, he did, did he?" smiled My Lady, "I thought as much."

"You thought?" Quick alarm in the girl's tone.

"That he proposed to you, certainly. And what is more, that you were about to accept," came the reply, with great promptness.

"Accept him! Marry him!" There could be no mistake about the genuine ring of disgust in the girl's exclamation.

Lady Sarah indulged herself in a sly, self-satisfied little smile. "You handed him the mitten? Poor fellow! That's hard luck. He needed the—it, so much." Her sarcastic sympathy cloaked the feeling of elation at her success in dragging that delightful secret from its quiet hiding-place.

For a moment the girl did not reply. She wavered, hesitated. Then she began to tell about Ybarra's persistent aggressiveness, yet omitting all reference to Mrs. Butworth or the Viscount's distressing allusions involving her aunt.

Lady Edgethorpe listened with keenest attention. Not a detail was lost to her alert perception.

"That is perfectly stunning!" she exclaimed, when the narrative was finished. "Helen, you are a trumph!"

The girl's answer was a faint smile and a little sigh. To unburden herself had been an unspeakable relief. This confidential chat took a tremendous load from her mind. The sultry depression which had

weighed her down, lessened, and the air she breathed seemed purer, in a measure freed from evil miasms. Withal, unquiet still beset her, a vague suspicion of which she could not rid herself, which gripped at her heart and made it beat faster with apprehension. The consciousness of his hateful insinuations had fastened its fangs upon her and taken relentless hold.

Almost as though talking in an undertone to herself, she said: "But he will not release me,—he is determined,—he will persecute me with his attentions——"

"Don't mind him, my dear. Don't worry." Lady Sarah reassured her in a patronizing way. "We'll dispose of him. Count me as your ally."

Then, rising abruptly, after a quick glance at the tiny watch dangling on her waist, and holding out a delicate hand: "How time flies! Really, I must go now!" Furs adjusted, a dainty squeeze of fingers, and the soft whisper: "Never you mind, dear, if he gets offensive. *We* will settle him," and My Lady was gone, the precious little secret tucked securely away in her retentive mind.

Helen was alone. Mechanically she went back to the tea-table, sank down in a chair, and, head clasped in slender white fingers, elbow braced against the arm rest, became deeply immersed in revery.

Her attitude was still unchanged when a little later Mrs. Butworth, pleasant-faced, stately and proud, swept grandly into the drawing-room.

"Why, Helen, all by yourself?" she asked, with some surprise.

The girl turned, rose slowly. "I am suffering from a frightful headache, auntie. I think I had better retire," she said, listlessly.

"You are pale, child," observed Mrs. Butworth, solicitously, patting her fondly on the cheek. "Yes, go and rest a little."

With a sudden impulse Helen threw her arms around the elder woman's neck and broke into sobs. "Oh, auntie, dear——"

"Child, child!" soothed Mrs. Butworth, caressing the wavy masses of soft hair, "don't give way. This hurly-burly of the social rush is getting on your nerves. You must take care of yourself, my darling, else you will break down. Come now," leading her tenderly toward the door, "I will send your maid up. Lie down and rest a while,—it's your nerves,—it will pass off."

For a brief moment Mrs. Butworth stood there pensively. Then she rang for a servant. "Serve my tea upstairs," she said, and swished out of the room.

CHAPTER VII

THE PRIVATE LETTERS OF AN AMBASSADOR

HIS EXCELLENCY DON PIO DE CAMPONERO was by no means in a placid frame of mind.

The Ambassador was seated at his writing table in the somber-looking study, puffing irritably at a long black cigar. Stacks of documents, letters, reports, and the like were piled up before him. He would have to wade through this abominable mass of correspondence! There were reports from agents all over the United States which had to be carefully gone over; instructions and suggestions from the home government requiring exhaustive replies; memorials from commercial bodies, from church organizations, from individuals. And all this because the meddlesome Yankees, who always poke their noses into other people's business, had seen fit to interfere with the affairs of the crown of Spain, under the mask of sentimental concern and humanitarian principles!

"Execrable, execrable!" growled His Excellency in utter disgust, as he aimlessly fingered the pages of a lengthy report, glancing here and there at a sentence. He laid the paper down, adjusted his monocle and turned slowly to the First Secretary, Viscount Ybarra, who sat at the side of the desk, watching his chief with supercilious, smiling languor. The smile disappeared instantly, however, when the secre-

tary perceived that the torpid attention of the Ambassador was to be concentrated on him.

"There are fresh reports of armed expeditions getting ready to be smuggled into Cuba?" queried Don Pio.

"Quite a number," replied the secretary. "Two ships hiding at lonesome places in Delaware Bay. Men on both of them. Cargoes of arms being shipped in small consignments by rail from Hartford to Chester, where they are transhipped on little sailboats down the bay."

The Ambassador frowned. "We shall have to repeat the weary process of making representations," he sighed. "It is very annoying."

Ybarra shrugged his shoulders. "Our representations will be met by the amiable Secretary of State,"—this in a sneering tone—"with the same stereotyped answer, 'That the government of the United States, inspired by the highest sense of friendly concern, has performed, and is still performing, a most difficult task with the single purpose of doing its whole duty,'—and so forth, and so forth." He mimicked the mannerisms of that venerable functionary, the Secretary of State, to perfection, as he quoted the elaborate formula so familiar to him through frequent repetitions.

Don Pio focussed his monocle on the secretary. He did not like the eternal sneer of this arrogant young fellow. In fact, he did not feel at all sure that it was not meant for himself. Still he maintained that calm and impassive pose, which is one

of the elementary requirements of diplomatic practice, and is supposed to indicate the possession of a very superior brand of lofty wisdom.

"That phrase is quite familiar to me, thank you," he remarked stiffly. "Experience has taught us that the American government is lamentably deficient in enforcing the neutrality laws,—perhaps wilfully so. But we must suppress our indignation and give no pretext for intervention of any kind."

"We shall have to be prepared for it, nevertheless," replied the secretary. "It may come sooner or later."

"It will not come, if we can prevent it by skilful diplomatic manipulation," retorted His Excellency, with a show of warmth. "It *shall* not come."

Viscount Ybarra looked quietly at his superior, making a mental note of this unusual and quite uncalled-for display of emotion.

"Our attitude should be as pacific as feasible under the circumstances, yet we must neglect no opportunity to press on the attention of the American government the necessity of fulfilling its international obligations," Don Pio observed with severity.

"I beg to agree entirely with Your Excellency," replied the Viscount, "still I would suggest that steps be taken in other directions to force the Department of State into an abandonment of its systematic policy of aggression."

"What steps?" inquired Don Pio, somewhat puzzled.

"I am convinced that a wholesome pressure, ex-

erted by other powerful governments in a discreet manner, might accomplish this end."

"Bah! A concert of European powers is an illusion," replied the Ambassador, disapprovingly. "Their interests are so diversified that they cannot be united even in the face of the American danger.—There is England, for instance, craving the good will of the United States ever since the Venezuelan boundary imbroglio,—for fear that her colonial interests may some day be injured by this clumsy republican giant. We could not expect that Downing Street would help us."

A few puffs of the black cigar and Don Pio continued: "Germany? Ah, this erratic Emperor, who displays a sudden affection for this nation of political buccaneers! No sane reason whatever for such a short-sighted policy. The two nations are natural rivals. A life and death struggle between them must soon come, and yet this senseless whim of the Emperor. Russia? Pshaw! How could we get a concert of Europe to correct the indefensible attitude of the United States toward us?"

Viscount Ybarra listened with impatience to the Ambassador's long-winded harangue, which was delivered with the air of a schoolmaster lecturing an ignorant pupil.

"My suggestion does not refer to an European concert; I mean an alliance," he said slowly, emphasizing the last word.

"An alliance!" exclaimed the Ambassador. The monocle dropped from its resting-place and fell clink-

ing upon the mahogany table, as Don Pio, forgetful of his artificial pose, bent forward with a start. "An alliance is impossible," he added, curtly.

"Why impossible, Your Excellency?"

"Because an alliance would mean war, and we must maintain peace by all means. No, your idea is unfortunate, Vizconde."

Don Pio leaned back in his chair with a wave of his hand as though he would waft away the Viscount with his objectionable suggestions.

But Ybarra was not to be so easily suppressed. "The alliance which I have in view would not necessarily mean war," he insisted. "While an European concert is out of the question, for obvious reasons, a group could be formed, powerful enough to check this American craving for expansion: Austria, Italy, and France. The mere strength of such an alliance would forbid war. Even these reckless Americans would understand that."

Don Pio did not reply at once. He fumbled among the papers on the table for a box of matches and made several unsuccessful attempts to relight his cigar. Then he said, indifferently: "An interesting combination——"

"Interesting!" Ybarra was nettled. "Certainly powerful enough to bring the United States to their knees, I dare say."

"—but impracticable," continued Don Pio,—puff-puff. The cigar smoke again whirled in curling clouds from the Ambassador's lips, "Entirely impracticable!"—puff-puff.

"A big bully like this republic can be held in check only by a bigger bully. Every statesman must concede that," said Ybarra, testily.

The Ambassador frowned. There was a peculiar harshness in the Viscount's voice which jarred upon him.

"You are very fond of your opinions, Ybarra," he said.

"I adhere to them when I am convinced they are right," was the dogged reply.

"Vizconde Ybarra, older and more experienced men have been shipwrecked on their so-called convictions."

"This is not a question of age and experience, but of quick action to escape disaster," retorted Ybarra, angrily.

"Quick action by mixing oil and fire; that is the sort of alliance you propose."

Ybarra took no heed of the Ambassador's sarcasm. "The alliance is perfectly feasible," he declared, emphatically. "Austria's friendly attitude is assured from the beginning and Italy's co-operation will naturally follow. Dynastic reasons will induce Francis Joseph to plead with Queen Victoria for England's neutrality. The Emperor corresponds frequently with her, as we know, and his personal influence is potent with the Queen, who entertains the highest regard for His Apostolic Majesty. Downing Street would not be able to disregard the Queen's wishes, despite their tendency to coddle the United States."

Don Pio's comment was a shrug.

"It would not be difficult to secure Italy's co-operation," the Viscount went on, "as Goluchowski's representations will count for much in Rome. Again Italy and France are bound together by their Mediterranean interests, and for some time past their relations have been very intimate."

"Hardly enough to warrant joint action as contemplated in this case," came the rejoinder. "Your structure, Vizconde, has a serious flaw in its very foundation. France would have to figure as the corner-stone, but your mortar has not sufficient strength to hold it in place. No architect can build without first-class material."

Don Pio showed signs of increased annoyance. Why in the name of Hades wouldn't this secretary understand that his irrelevant conceits found no favor with his superior?

"The Vatican will furnish the architect, and Christian love is an excellent mortar," persisted Ybarra, ignoring Don Pio's manifest disinclination to pursue the subject.

"The Vatican? Your jests are quite out of place, Vizconde."

"I am far from jesting. The Holy See is most anxious to assist us, and Cardinal Rampolla commands a peerless ally in Paris, an intimate friend of foreign minister Lacroix."

"And that is——?"

"The Duchess de Brizieres."

"What! Not the pious Duchess Amélie?" asked

Don Pio, whose curiosity was now aroused. His curiosity was always quickly aroused when he scented a spicy chapter of the *chronique scandaleuse*.

"She is as pretty as she is pious, and sweetly conscious of her charms, which she employs with finesse," laughed Ybarra. "Lacroix is *connaissanceur* and derives much inspiration from the lovely Duchess. He has been fast in her net for more than two years."

"Amazing!" was all Don Pio could utter.

"The ways of the world," chuckled Ybarra. "A little innocent flirtation affords pleasant relief from fervent spiritual observance, and it is apt to further one's prospect in the world beyond, if indulged in for the greater glory of the Church."

"Hm, quite true. But Lacroix would need a pretext to explain the change of front in his policy toward the Vatican. Will the petticoats of Madame de Brizieres furnish that also?" asked the Ambassador, scornfully.

"No difficulty about that," returned Ybarra. "In order to preserve the integrity of the Spanish monarchy the Vatican would be willing to adopt a more conciliatory policy toward France and thus pave the way for an understanding. At the same time representations would be made from Madrid to the French government, which is bound to safeguard the interests of French investors holding our securities to the amount of hundreds of millions of francs."

"*Que va!* You are weaving cobwebs, Vizconde, which will tear at the slightest touch. It is a waste

of time to discuss the matter any further," said the Ambassador, categorically.

Ybarra's face became rigid. "Your Excellency does me the injustice of underrating the importance of my suggestion. The plan proposed by me offers the only means of saving Spain from destruction. Its consummation, therefore, is a necessity."

"A necessity?" repeated Don Pio, sharply, "not at all! I certainly shall not lend my help to such a fantastic scheme."

"But you *will*, nevertheless," insisted Ybarra. His tone was almost threatening.

"Vizconde, what does this mean? You presume——"

"I simply speak my conviction. The alliance must be formed, and if you will not be its sponsor, Don Pio de Camponero," said Ybarra, haughtily, "you must agree that you will not hamper me in the negotiations."

"I must? I *must*?" cried the Ambassador, furiously. "Vizconde, you forget where you are."

Don Pio bounded from his chair, glaring at the secretary. Ybarra rose almost simultaneously and the two men stood facing each other. A vicious light gleamed in the Viscount's eyes.

"Your attitude, Señor Don Pio, might be capable of misconstruction. An Ambassador of Spain would draw upon himself severe suspicion should he oppose the only means of sparing his country an ignominious fate."

Don Pio could hardly contain himself any longer.

He fairly trembled with rage. "Señor Vizconde, your language is an affront! It implies——"

"That the government at Madrid would surmise queer motives,—if all the circumstances were known."

"Circumstances! What circumstances?" gasped the Ambassador.

"The intrigues, for instance, connected with certain concessions in Cuba, grants which are worth many millions to the American promoters," was the frigid reply.

"What is that to me?" cried Don Pio, savagely. "You——"

"The correspondence speaks for itself,"—Ybarra glowered at his opponent,—"would you care to examine the copies of the letters which I took the liberty to preserve?"

The Ambassador's face became livid. He staggered back into his chair. He tried to speak, but the words seemed to choke him. An impotent rage welled up within him. He mastered himself with an effort.

"You have—spied—on my private correspondence!" he gurgled.

"Letters concerning public affairs are not private correspondence," retorted Ybarra, imperturbably.

Don Pio stared at the Viscount with ghastly expression. He half rose. His hands twitched nervously. An almost irresistible desire came over him to do something violent. How it would relieve his feelings could he but seize that imp's throat, fling

him against the heavy oaken door, and beat his vicious brains out! He lurched away from his desk and stifled a groan.

"Your Excellency not feeling well?" inquired the Viscount, unctuously, with an ugly smile.

Don Pio only uttered another groan and sank back limp in the big armchair.

For a moment Ybarra stood gloating over the sorry spectacle. Then he bent nonchalantly over the table and busied himself with some papers.

Presently he remarked, in a matter-of-fact tone: "Some inquiries from Madrid require immediate answers. I will attend to that unless Your Excellency desires to dispose otherwise."

The Ambassador made a sign in the affirmative, without looking at him, and Ybarra withdrew with a polite bow.

When the door had closed behind the Viscount Don Pio slowly rose. His pale face still betrayed the violent emotions which he had undergone, and his hands trembled. Muttering an imprecation he went to the large safe standing in a corner of the study and pulled out a secret drawer. He took a bundle of papers and examined them carefully.

"They are all here," he murmured. "How in the devil's name can he have knowledge of them? Are they not secure even in this place?" He cogitated for a moment. "It is impossible that he could have taken them out of this safe. The rascal must have opened the original correspondence and copied the letters before mailing. I am in his hands,

that is certain. If he carries out his hare-brained schemes everything will be ruined!"

He drew a perfumed handkerchief and touched his forehead, which was covered with beads of cold perspiration. "Time is precious. I must act!"

Leaving the Ambassador's study Viscount Ybarra ascended to his own apartments, two spacious rooms in the rear of the embassy building, looking out on a quiet side street. He was in excellent humor, humming a tune as he went along. When he reached his "den," as he called the comfortable sitting-room filled with curiosities from many countries where he had seen service, he slammed the door with a bang, went over to the large mirror and made a ceremonious bow to his counterfeit reflected in the crystal:

"Vizconde Genoso Ybarra, I am quite pleased with you!"

Then, burying his hands in his trousers pockets he paced up and down for a while, chuckling to himself. He halted before a photograph representing Don Pio in a pretentious pose, clad in gold-embroidered uniform and bristling with glittering decorations.

Ybarra crossed his arms. "What an inspiration you are to me!" He burst out laughing: "If ever a subtle diplomat lost his equilibrium it is you, most honored Señor. Hahaha! Did I shock you? More's the pity! How deadly pale you turned, old hypocrite, when you saw I held the threads of your fine money-making game in my hands! What a

spectacle to behold you, this haughty, high and mighty personage, rage and splutter and froth! And I may wind you around my little finger now. You dare not counteract my carefully laid plans,—you *dare* not! The leaven has been working for months and the time is ripe. You must serve me as catspaw, and then, over your useless old body, I shall climb to higher honors,—the highest will be within my reach!”

“Blundering old fossil!” he went on, “you cannot halt the inevitable. Cobwebs? Indeed. I fancy the meshes will be strong enough to ensnare this blustering republic——” he gritted his teeth.

Ybarra stepped to the table, lighted a cigarette and threw himself on the swelling divan, which, by draperies of rich Persian stuffs, had been made into a cozy resting-place. Sinking deep into the soft cushions he blew forth dreamily the fragrant smoke in dense clouds.

His imagination soared to infinite distances.

The ringlets floating about him took the shape of huge ships of war rushing through foaming seas.

A French fleet assembled at Martinique, ready to strike a telling blow at the Gulf ports.

The great cities of the North trembling at the approach of Spain’s fast cruisers, in abject fear of devastation and pillage.

Transports embarking an army to be thrown from Cuban shores into Florida,—Spaniards and Frenchmen, joined by the white uniforms of the Austrians.

The humiliation of the American republic was in-

evitable, unless the Washington government would retrace its steps and cease its interference with European affairs.

And this master stroke would be his work. *His* work! *His* would be the glory and the reward! The initiatory moves had been made. Only the spark was needed to start the immense conflagration——

A rap at the door interrupted the revelry of thought. Diego, his trustworthy old factotum, entered: "A telegram for you, Don Genoso."

Ybarra jumped up with a start and held out his hand. "Give it to me."

He tore open the envelope. The dispatch bore the Havana date line. With eager eyes he scanned the message, which contained but a few words. A glow of intense excitement spread over his face, his eyes sparkled with vicious triumph. He walked quickly over to the fireplace and threw the little yellow sheet on the smoldering embers. It flared up for a moment, and the curling ashes crumbled.

"The cards are shuffled," he muttered, "and Satan will deal. Let the game proceed!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLIRTATIONS OF A CUBAN GENTLEMAN

FOR some minutes Viscount Ybarra stood silently facing that fireplace. Arms crossed, he followed the flickering flames with eager looks and watched until the curling black ashes, again traversed by insatiable fiery lines, had been reduced to a tiny heap of powdery white. The exultant smile of triumph still played around his lips.

Turning halfway toward the old majordomo: "You know, Diego, what it means? This scrap of paper here, Diego?" pointing to the little whitish heap, now hardly distinguishable from the glowing log. "Do you know what it bodes to me?"

Diego smirked sheepishly and bowed his head: "How should I know, Don Genoso?"

"You can't imagine? Haha! You are dull, my good Diego, dull as a beetle!"

With a few strides he stepped up to the old man and slapped him vigorously on the shoulder in almost boyish exuberance:

"Diego," he whispered, "those words which can no longer be traced were innocent enough. Listen! The telegram said: 'The trousseau is finished. The Lady will start her journey within four days.' In four days! You grasp the meaning?"

The expression of exultant triumph in the Vis-

count's face had changed to one of lowering, foxy craftiness.

The old man shook his head perplexedly and repeated: "How should I know, Don Genoso?"

"It means, Diego, that a spark, signaled by this message, will set the world afire within four days," hissed Ybarra. Raising his voice he continued: "And that conflagration ushers in my triumph,—the loftiest exaltation, the attainment of my most ambitious cravings,—honors, advancement beyond common hopes,—*power*—a world's mastery! Mark my words, honest Diego,"—a short, low chuckle—"when the devil starts a game he plays it to perfection,—and with results."

Appalled at such blasphemous utterances the old majordomo hastily made the sign of the cross, and, looking with anxious reproof at his reckless young master, he faltered: "It—it is not well to speak in vain of the spirit of darkness, Don Genoso."

"Bah! Nonsense! Merely *façon de parler*, that's all, you old-fashioned Diego. What of it?"

"Ah, Don Genoso," the old man rocked his head doubtfully, "the Evil One is a harsh associate. May the Sainted Virgin grant us her protection!" And again he crossed himself devoutly.

"Come, don't be owlish. The tocsin sounds! Triumph hails me. For those who love me this is a time to rejoice."

"None, surely, can be more rejoiced by your good fortune than I, Don Genoso," replied the old man,

simply, his face lighting up with a proud and almost tender look.

The trusty old retainer loved his master with more than a father's love. He had been the Viscount's faithful attendant from the days of early youth, now uniting in his person the various functions of majordomo, body-servant, and confidential adviser. In the long years of family service his erstwhile jet black hair had turned an iron gray, and though his figure was slightly bent, he carried his more than sixty winters well. The strong, swarthy face showed hardly any wrinkles, and his alert bearing gave no evidence of senile decay.

"No one rejoices more than I, Don Genoso," he repeated, "but——"

"I know it, Diego, I know it," interrupted the Viscount, quickly, and with warmth, laying his hand on the old man's shoulder. "Say no more."

He walked briskly over to the window whence he gazed pensively down into the quiet street bathed in the bracing freshness of a crisp, sunny winter morning.

Presently he wheeled about on his heels and remarked in a careless, jaunty tone: "Diego, I think I have earned a little recreation."

"Your work has been incessant, Don Genoso," replied the old retainer, "you must not overstrain even a healthy body. Nature demands relaxation. Would you take a hunting trip?"

"Yes, a hunting trip, the very thing," and the

Viscount broke into a frivolous laugh, "you have hit the nail on the head."

"Shall I prepare, then, the hunting outfit?"

"No, no, leave the guns where they are. I shall take only an umbrella or a walking-cane," said Ybarra, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Not the guns? A walking-cane? An umbrella? Perhaps I did not understand you, Don Genoso."

"You will understand presently, my Diego. The quarry I am after does not haunt the forest. I am in search of more delicate game. I shall not go far."

The old man coughed, respectfully, and the sharp-set mouth expanded into a quizzical grin. "I believe I understand, Don Genoso. You will go alone?"

"Yes, I shall not need you. I may be absent a day or two, but you know where to reach me if anything important develops here."

"I know, Don Genoso."

"Exactly, Diego," nodded Ybarra. "You may tell the Ambassador if he should happen to inquire for me that I had to leave hurriedly for New York."

A few moments later Viscount Ybarra emerged from the rear entrance of the embassy, which opened upon a quiet side street and afforded private access to his detached apartments. He strolled leisurely downtown, toward the business district of the city, twirling his dainty olive wood cane. Smiling affably at the passers-by, with a nod here and there to an acquaintance, he had the aspect of a man serenely satisfied with himself and with the world in general.

Presently he entered one of the large department stores. Behind one of the counters, on which a varied collection of gloves was displayed, stood three girls.

"There is your Cuban again," whispered one of them, a frisky little brunette, to one of her companions, a very handsome girl, with wavy chestnut hair, easily the prettiest of the trio.

"Why, yes, Mary, your Cuban lover, your sugar prince, there he comes," giggled the tall girl with the freckles.

"Sugar prince? What makes you call him that?" asked the brunette.

"He is just too sweet for anything, and then, they say, he has immense sugar plantations in Cuba, and anyhow, he has all kinds of money,—loads of it, hasn't he, Mary? And such a beautiful mustache!"

"I'm jealous, really and truly," sighed the brunette. "Mary, how lucky you are. Has he really so much money. Are you going to marry him?"

The girl to whom these questions were addressed blushed deeply and brushed back her wealth of unruly tresses with a nervously twitching hand. Her dreamy blue eyes avoided the direction from which Ybarra was approaching and she busied herself with the chaos of gloves on the counter. Then she cast an imploring glance at her two companions, a mute appeal to their better nature, to stop their raillery.

"It's all right, we won't give you away," assured the brunette.

The other turned aside with a pout and seemed engrossed with some boxes piled up at the far end of the counter, and when Ybarra reached the collection of gloves both girls had found something to occupy their attention at a distance.

"Good-morning, Miss Mary, always busy?" asked his soft voice.

The girl started, as awakening from a dream, and met the Viscount's glance with a happy smile.

"How are you, Mr. Alvarez? I am so glad to see you."

"Are you really, Mary?" said the Viscount, with a look of intense meaning. "Not more so, surely, than I am to bask in the sunshine of your beautiful eyes."

"Mr. Alvarez, please don't talk that way," she said, coloring furiously, "if somebody should overhear you what would they think?" and she glanced furtively around to see whether her companions could by any chance have listened. Both were far enough away, however, to escape the suspicion of eavesdropping.

"But I mean it with all my heart, Mary. You know well that I can only be entirely happy when I may look into your dear, laughing eyes, and I have but one wish, that the time may come when I shall be always with you."

"Mr. Alvarez,"—her slender figure trembled visibly, "please——"

A floor-walker was approaching and the Viscount quickly assuming an unconcerned air said:

"Yes, something like this, please," stripping off one of his gloves.

The girl selected several boxes and opening them spread out the contents. The Viscount, with a great show of seriousness, began to pick out various pairs of gloves, comparing the shades of color critically, and then requested her to please try them on, so that he might be sure of the fit. The floor-walker passed by, his attention having been attracted to another part of the store.

"This is not an auspicious place for an extended conversation, I fear," laughed Ybarra, "and I do not wish to be so indelicate as to expose you to the questioning glances of the vulgar, who do not understand. In fact, Mary," he whispered, without betraying that his words were anything beyond a comment upon the important business of trying on gloves, "I came here solely to arrange with you for a little theater party of two. What do you think of it? Have you any engagement for to-night?"

"To the theater?" The girl blushed with pleasure. "Oh, I would love to go."

"I would like to take you to see the famous play 'Sappho.' What do you say?"

"'Sappho'? I never heard of it. Where do they play it? I have not seen the advertisement in the papers," she said, with a shade of disappointment.

"No, it is not on the boards here, sweet girl," laughed Ybarra, softly, "and probably will not be. I had planned a little excursion in connection with the theater. The company is now in Baltimore,

after more than a hundred performances in New York, and from there they go to Chicago without giving Washington a chance for the present. It is one of the most thrilling plays ever put on the American stage. I am certain you would enjoy it immensely."

"But to Baltimore!" faltered the girl. "How could I go to Baltimore? I could not get mother's consent to go out of town alone with a gentleman."

"It would not be different from going to any theater here in town," assured Ybarra. "There is a theater train about midnight, and you might find some excuse which would satisfy her if you are a little late. You might for my sake, Mary?"

She hesitated. The proposition was so alluring, yet the obstacles seemed so great, almost unsurmountable. A thrill of excitement pulsated through her body. If she could only persuade her mother, what a pleasure it would be, how romantic!

But the tempter was not to be balked or routed by such trivial considerations as the possible objections of a mother. "After the performance we could go to my aunt's house, who lives not far from the theater, for a cozy little supper, and still have ample time to catch the train for home. It would be delightful, wouldn't it? I wrote her a few lines this morning to expect us, and I know she will be only too pleased to receive you. You remember I spoke to you of my aunt in Baltimore? She is a dear old lady, very fond of me. You see that

would be perfectly proper, no one could find any fault with such a visit,—purely a family affair.”

Temptation gained the day. “I would just love to go,” she sighed. “But the time is so short. I shall have to be prepared. I must have time to arrange it with mother. I am afraid I shall have to make up some story to explain that I shall come home late. If it was to-morrow,—you know on Saturdays some of the girls often arrange for dances or parties, after the store closes. It would be easier to explain it to mother that way.”

Had Viscount Ybarra spoken his real mind the utterance probably would have contained some allusion to cumbersome and over anxious mothers, coupled with a forceful invitation to some unknown power to blast them, or blow them, or visit some other terrible dispensation upon them. But after all, he was in a fair way of gaining his point, and one day would not make much difference. Had he not often spent weeks in stalking less precious game? A little patience always pays.

“Let it be to-morrow, then,” he agreed, pleasantly. “I can easily change my arrangements.” A faint, mocking smile played around the corners of his mouth. “I should hate to embarrass you in the least, but I would be profoundly disappointed if our little plans were to come to naught.”

The girl smiled winningly. “I will find a way. I would not disappoint you.”

“Trust a woman to find a way,” laughed Ybarra, “if she is bent on finding it.”

"But you had better go now," she whispered, slipping the gloves hurriedly into a paper cover, "everybody is looking at us."

"Very well, I shall meet you at the station shortly before six to-morrow."

"I will be there," she breathed almost inaudibly, as she handed him the little package.

"Thank you, miss," said the Viscount, with a courteous nod, and walked off, as one of the girls came toward them.

"Why, Mary Ellwood, I *do* declare! There you pack the Gentlemen's Walking Number Sevens into the Ladies' Evening Dress box! Did I ever! What is the matter with you?" exclaimed the freckled girl in voluble astonishment.

"Has he proposed?" asked the little brunette, in an anxious whisper. "When are you going to be married?"

But Mary did not reply. Her thoughts were dwelling in dreamland, ever so far away.

"What's his name, anyhow?" demanded the freckled girl.

"Mr. Juan Alvarez," pompously announced the brunette, with a side-glance toward Mary, priding herself on being able to divulge an important secret of which she had been the sole repository for nearly a week, since the day, in fact, when the gentleman in question had made his last previous appearance at the store and her insatiable curiosity had worried the name out of the embarrassed and blushing Mary.

CHAPTER IX

AND OF A SPANISH GRANDEE

THE palatial mansion of the Vallandingham Butworths on Massachusetts Avenue was brilliantly illuminated. Those gigantic bronze candelabra with clusters of large electric lights guarding the entrance of the magnificent residence like rigid, haughty sentinels, shed forth their light subdued by milky globes, imparting to the rain-splashed asphalt pavement a glassy sheen. A canopy spread its protecting folds from the wide portal to the street. Carriage after carriage clattered up to the canopy, depositing its load of loveliness incarnate enveloped in costly opera cloaks; or fat old dowagers sparkling with diamonds, and fur-coated gentlemen.

Within the portal stood two footmen in blue rocco coats and old gold velveteen knee breeches,—as rigid as the bronze candelabra without,—opening the doors with a wide sweep whenever the rumble of another carriage signaled a new arrival. On the broad staircase in the white marble vestibule, which palms and blooming potted plants had transformed into a gorgeous fairy bower—more rigid and supercilious footmen in blue and old gold, to indicate, with a slight stiff bow, and a low-voiced: “Ladies, please,” or “Gentlemen, please,” the cloak-room where the arrivals might shed their outer garments.

Mrs. Vallandigham Butworth held one of her "At Home's" which at once were the envy and the delight of the inner circles of Washington society. Charming functions, to which only the very cream of the diplomatic set were bidden. These gatherings, never large or crowded, were extremely select, and withal exquisitely informal, as soon as the cordon of flunkies had been passed and the guest was ushered into the magnificent suite of drawing-rooms where this queen of society was enthroned.

Aided by enormous wealth, prudently and effectively employed, and by a flexible, intuitive instinct, Mrs. Butworth had slowly won her victory, gaining for herself, and incidentally for her husband, a commanding position among the exclusive social forces of the capital, which monopolized the diplomatic and high official circles. In that superb residence, which his financial operations had provided, she created a *milieu* distinctly adapted to the taste of the distinguished foreigners who compose the diplomatic corps. She baited one after the other of these titled celebrities, and possessed the secret of keeping them pleased in their surroundings, by catering to their individual fancies or idiosyncracies, an ever-charming hostess.

All this was much to the gratification of her own vanity, and to the eminent satisfaction of her worthy, money-making husband, whose financial interests were often well served by valuable information unobtrusively obtained at first hand, filtering through

him with lightning rapidity into friendly Wall Street channels.

The hostess, radiant in a costly yet simple costume of white brocaded satin, embroidered in gold, received her guests as usual in the far-famed tapestry drawing-room. Her superb figure, though somewhat inclining to fullness, did not indicate that she had passed the fatal line of forty. A solitaire diamond, set in a narrow golden band, glittered in the dark brown hair, which showed but the minutest tracing of gray. Enlivened by a pair of vivacious brown eyes, her face, still free from treacherous lines, bore the evidence of most skillful rejuvenating treatment, almost resembling the bloom of youth.

Her intimates, and those whose social position largely depended on her good will, fondly called her "The Marchioness," while in the large circle of others, who never were able to penetrate into her exclusive "At Homes," she was described as a designing, selfish, and haughty woman. In a measure probably both were right. Madame occupied the center of the social stage, and meant to keep it, even if the social ambitions of many had to be ruthlessly crushed. Only those chosen by herself as suitable to further her own purposes could be allowed to follow in her train, but to these select she was sweetness and grace personified.

Surrounded by a bevy of pretty girls, and beaus of more or less distinct ages, Mrs. Butworth greeted the guests as they arrived. A smile and a pleasant word for a senator, and a dainty handshake for his

wife; a friendly nod to a young attaché; the exchange of grave compliments with a venerable judge; a charmingly cordial greeting to an ambassador; then she would gracefully hand the new arrival over to one of her satellites and greet the next. Everyone felt as though he or she was the particular favorite, basking in the magic rays of madame's social halo. From this brilliant center small groups would drift into cozy nooks of adjoining drawing-rooms, or to the buffet in the dining-room, or to the library, where the privilege of smoking was graciously granted.

"My dear Viscount, I am charmed to see you," said Mrs. Butworth to the young Spanish diplomat, who had just made his entrance. "Our little circle would not seem complete without you."

Ybarra bent gallantly over madame's well-shaped hand and touched it lightly with his perfumed mustache. "It is very good of you to say so, Mrs. Butworth, but indeed I should be most unhappy if I were to miss any of your delightful *jours fixes*."

"Flatterer!" laughed the marchioness, tapping his shoulder with her jeweled fan, "I suspect our lively American girls are the flowers which attract the butterflies."

"The queen of flowers, your American Beauty, is breaking the hearts of the poor butterflies," said Ybarra, casting a burning glance at Helen Lane, who stood close by in the cluster of bewitching girls. "The faithful who worship before a marble shrine are not rewarded for their prayers."

"Pious prayers are often efficacious, when the god-

dess becomes convinced of the sincerity of the suppliant, Señor Ybarra. But butterflies will be butterflies," nodded Mrs. Butworth, kindly, turning halfway to welcome another guest.

One of the pretty girls standing in the group near the hostess glanced around and whispered, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes: "I heard you talking of American Beauties, Viscount. You are sentimental to-night. That is a new rôle for you."

"A rôle, Miss Wyndham? Do you consider me an actor?"

"And rather an accomplished one," came the swift and somewhat tart reply, "if it is true, what I heard the other day."

The Viscount advanced closer. "If you will pardon me for asking, what may that have been?"

"Why, I am told there was a small private party not long ago, where Viscount Ybarra created much merriment by some very excellent impersonations of some ve-ry dis-tin-guished gen-tle-men," said Miss Wyndham, in a confidential tone, giving a mocking imitation of the manner of speech peculiar to a man high in official life, and winding up her parody with a merry little laugh.

"Miss Wyndham——"

"Pssh, Señor Vizconde," laughed the girl, "come, be good now, and take me to a seat somewhere. I am quite overcome by the hard task of 'assisting' in the circle, and we can chat better on a settee."

Politely the Viscount offered his arm, though with a moment's hesitation, and not without darting an

intense glance at Helen, who pretended to listen with attention to the pleasantries of a martial-looking old beau and was evidently quite oblivious to his presence.

Ybarra chose a settee in a corner, from which the whole drawing-room and part of the next could easily be overlooked.

"Miss Wyndham, how can you be so pitiless as to refer quite publicly to that little affair, which would make me the *bête noir* with the powers that be if anything about it should be carried to them. Have I deserved that at your hands?" He looked at her insinuatingly.

"It is not the only proof of your versatility as an actor," persisted Miss Wyndham, with a pout, "and really you deserve much harsher treatment, Viscount Ybarra. I have seen and heard things myself——"

"I am wondering——"

Without heeding his interruption Miss Wyndham continued: "Only the other day, at the Fairmount musicale, when you showered compliments on compliments on that hateful thing Consuelo Coronini, until she was so puffed up that she became positively insufferable. And a minute later you came to me and made the most stinging comment about her voice and her style of singing, and what you chose to call her abominable taste in clothes,—all in one breath. Wouldn't such acting make a marble statue quiver with emotion?"

"But Roberta!"

"Please *don't* call me Roberta,"—her voice wavered almost imperceptibly,—“after,—after you have just spoken of American Beauties with such heavenly enthusiasm, and complained that your prayers to your goddess are not rewarded——”

The Viscount bit his lips. “The little minx has overheard what I said to Mrs. Butworth,” he mused. “She must be watching me all the while. I shall have to be more careful.” Then, meeting her glance, he said:

“Well then, *Miss Wyndham*,” emphasizing the formal address, “but you used to find no fault when I called you Roberta.” The modulation of his voice became mellow and seductive, while he caressingly touched the girl’s hand, which rested on the settee beside him. “I implore you again, why should you treat me so harshly? You know well,” he whispered ardently, “there is but one girl I adore, and her name,—need I mention it?” His voice vibrated deliciously. He could do wonders with his voice when he wanted to, could Viscount Ybarra.

A glowing tint suffused Roberta Wyndham’s face. “You are very naughty, Viscount,” she murmured, while her sparkling eyes belied the reproach.

“But you are not averse to honest truth?” he gave back, with gay assurance, still touching her hand with caressing pressure.

Roberta laughed, a low, happy laugh. “I cannot bear to see you coquetting with those girls. You torment me.”

“Why should you take meaningless social atten-

tions so seriously, Roberta? Purely conventional phrases, empty compliments, a matter of social custom, nothing more," said the Viscount. "You would not have me act rudely?" Ybarra had resumed an easy conversational tone.

"You are simply incorrigible! I wish I could believe you,—or I did not care," she added with a sigh.

An expression of hidden triumph lurked in the Viscount's eyes, and as though he could not resist the temptation to tease her, after having won his easy victory, he hummed:

*"Oh, Doña Anna, fair of face,
Thy bright eyes never dimmed with tears:
Thou art the sunshine of my soul,
Thou saintly maid. However fierce
A tempest rages in my breast,
Thou——"*

He did not get any farther with his recitation.

"Viscount Ybarra, you are positively horrid!" exclaimed Roberta, quickly withdrawing her hand from his touch.

"Iss it not? Iss it not? I hev always told you he iss very horrid," said a crackling voice. A tall, lean figure, very blond of whiskers, through which angular cheekbones protruded, loomed up before the couple.

"Why, Prince Kropatchek, you almost frightened me!" cried Roberta, blushing vehemently.

"I would hate myself for frightening such a lovely lady," replied the Prince, blinking through his gold-rimmed glasses. "Ybarra must hev told you some ghost stories that made you so nervous, haha!" He chuckled and executed motions with his long, spider-like arms as though he wanted to hug himself.

"Ghost yourself," commented Ybarra in an undertone.

"Prince, you are a perfect humorist. I do so admire humorous people," said Miss Wyndham, who had immediately regained her composure.

"You do me an undeserved compliment, Miss Wyndham," returned the Prince. "I am so serious. I saw you here vith Ybarra, and I say to myself I must be the valiant knight to combat the dragon and lay my homage at the feet of the beautiful lady."

"Ah yes, Prince, you are the picture of that heroic knight," said Roberta, mischievously, turning to Ybarra, "was he not that romantic hero Don—Don—what's-his-name?"

"Don Quixote?" suggested the Viscount, blandly.

"Shame, Viscount Ybarra, you know I meant the famous Don Rodrigo, El Cid," corrected Roberta hastily, with a demure look.

Kropatchek, who had concentrated his attention on Ybarra, did not catch her remark. "Don Quixote? Haha! And Ybarra would be the vindmill? Iss he a vindmill? Not so bad, iss it?" crackled the Prince.

"You are just screamingly funny, Prince Kro-

patchek," cried Roberta, pressing her handkerchief against her lips.

"Deadly so," confirmed the Viscount.

"But you will excuse me," Miss Wyndham rose from the settee, "I am afraid our dear hostess might miss me in her circle." With a graceful bow and a significant glance at Ybarra she had slipped away.

"Kropatchek, I think we had better go to the buffet for some sherbet to cool off," said the Viscount, dryly.

"Develish fine girl, this Miss Wyndham," remarked the Prince, following her swift and graceful movements with rapture in his eyes.

"Fine girl, yes, but no money worth speaking of," —the Viscount shrugged his shoulders.

"No money? You don't say so! Too bad, too bad," murmured the Prince in a tone of earnest regret, as both disappeared into the dining-room.

CHAPTER X

THE POWERS AND WALL STREET

MEANTIME the shining pate of the worthy host could be seen bobbing from one group to another, in slow and dignified motion, as befitted his portly form. The busy bee was gathering his honey.

In the center of the drawing-room the banker espied the Spanish Ambassador.

There stood Don Pio, in solitary grandeur. The scant wisp of hair marking the middle of his high forehead was parted with painful accuracy; an opera hat under his arm; his thin lips wreathed in a benignant smile, which was as much part of his dress as the gloves or the indispensable monocle; his neck slightly bent while he was thoughtfully surveying the room, with its hum of chattering groups, its animated faces, its dazzling display of wealth, beauty, and smart elegance.

"How is my dear Ambassador? Glad to see you," said the great financier, extending his hand with perfunctory cordiality.

The diplomat reciprocated the greeting with a courteous nod, giving the extended hand a gingerly squeeze with three fingers.

"Let us find a quiet corner in the library. I would like to have a talk with you," continued the host, taking the Ambassador's arm.

He carried off Don Pio without much ceremony; like a privateer towing a valuable prize into a safe port. The library was empty, and they retired into a bay window, splendidly adapted for a little confidential confab. When they were comfortably seated on the softly cushioned divan, the banker dropped his cordial smile and remarked, in a business-like tone:

"Things do not look well according to my latest advices."

"What have you learned?" inquired Don Pio.

"A good deal of hostile sentiment is developing in Congress, I am told. That is due to the operations of the clique which supports the Cuban *Junta*. Of course, if war should come, that bond business would be a promising speculation. That is what they are driving at. As it looks to-day, they have good prospects."

"Those bonds will never have any value," declared the diplomat.

"They will if war should come and Spain should be defeated by this country," retorted the banker with brutal directness.

Don Pio de Camponero looked bored. He always looked bored, except when an admiring world paid due and proper homage to his amazing greatness, and the swinging censers wafted whirling clouds of incense to his gratefully expanding nostrils;—or when his acute ears caught the pleasing sound of a profitable business proposition.

"Flights of fancy, my dear Butworth, flights of

fancy," he said, striving to conceal his discomfort, but looking calmly at his interlocutor. "There will be no war. My government is using every effort to uphold peaceful relations."

"Not so much fancy; there are facts that have to be reckoned with. I have some bad news this evening. The illness of the Secretary of State has taken a turn for the worse. The end may be expected at any time, though they try to keep this absolutely secret."

Don Pio glanced at the banker with an expression of alarm. "Is that trustworthy?" And when Butworth gravely nodded his head, he added, reflectively: "Bad news indeed. Mr. Furnam's death would be a severe blow. His successor would probably be Assistant Secretary Crane?"

"Most likely," was the reply.

"The aggressive tendencies of that man are much to be feared. He would have great influence with the President."

"He certainly would," confirmed the banker. Then he asked abruptly: "How far have the negotiations with General Blanco proceeded?"

"They are going on smoothly."

"They have been going on smoothly for nearly six months to my certain knowledge," retorted the banker, sharply.

"I have sent an urgent letter, and my advices are that he is on the point of yielding. I may soon expect official confirmation of this," said Don Pio, reassuringly.

"There ought to be the least possible delay. If the concessions are not granted promptly there will be small chance of placing the new Spanish loan in New York. We cannot be sentimental in financial transactions. You must see that yourself."

Don Pio twirled the monocle between his fingers. "You Americans are such bustling people, and you think everything must go 'snap! snap! snap!'" he said, with his oily smile. "The Spanish custom is to consider, to go slow,——"

"As slow as damnation, that's sure!" ejaculated the banker, gruffly. "There are millions at stake, and they may slip out of our fingers just on account of those slow Spanish methods!"

"I am aware of the circumstances, my dear Butworth, but I am inclined to believe that the conditions surrounding the application in Havana could be favorably modified so as to accelerate action——"

"What is unsatisfactory now?" demanded the banker.

"Ah, unsatisfactory? That is not the right word, my dear friend. Everything is quite satisfactory. But there are certain channels through which the concessions have to pass, and progress might be quickened in ways well understood——"

"Well, where is the hitch? Do they still want a higher price? I thought that part of the matter was settled."

"You are so charmingly direct in your questions," smiled the diplomat.

"What use is there in beating about the bush?"

Business is business. Of course money is at the bottom of it. How much more will be needed to grease your channels in Havana?" asked Butworth, bluntly.

The eyes of the two men met. Neither of them flinched.

"Two hundred thousand dollars," said Don Pio, pleasantly, as though he were acknowledging a compliment.

The financier's look hardened. "Two hundred thousand dollars!" he repeated, slowly. "Enormous!"

The diplomat simply shrugged his shoulders. He looked significantly toward the door of the library, where two gentlemen, engrossed in animated conversation, had appeared.

The banker thought for a moment. "Contingent on the grant it will be paid to your banker in New York."

"Ah," said Don Pio, readjusting his monocle, "not contingent. It should be deposited without delay."

Butworth glared at him. "*Your* methods are not quite so slow," he said, scornfully. "Very well, to-morrow, then," he added, with unmistakable contempt.

"Ah," said Don Pio again. Both rose to greet Senator Fairmount and the French Ambassador.

"Come for a little quiet smoke?" asked Butworth, shaking hands with the Senator, when the two diplomats, after an ostentatious exchange of

courtesies, had segregated themselves and were talking earnestly in another corner of the room.

"Not exactly," replied Fairmount. "St. Pierre was looking for your Spanish friend, and I wanted to get his ideas about the Cuban situation. Mrs. Butworth told me she thought you and Camponero were probably in the library, and so we followed you here."

"Yes, I had quite a medicine talk with this Spaniard, but it ended with my swallowing the medicine," laughed Butworth, grimly.

"What's the trouble?"

"I'll tell you, Fairmount, but let's get a little further away from them," whispered the banker. "These dips' have ears like mice."

They walked a few steps, and Butworth continued: "You know about the Cuban concessions that were all but arranged with Weyler? Well, we had to start the whole thing over again when this featherweight Blanco came in, and now four months have gone, but we don't seem to get any nearer."

"You ought to push them."

"What can we do? We are at it all the time. But there is always some excuse or another, and demands for money at every turn. Only a few minutes ago that fellow over there,"—the banker made a backward motion with his head in the direction of Don Pio—"squeezed the lemon pretty hard, and I had to agree to put up another two hundred thousand."

Fairmount whistled softly. "Pretty heavy assessment! Why don't you throw the whole mess over if they want to bleed you that way?"

"Throw it over? You don't know what you're talking about. In the first place we have already paid out nearly a million dollars during the last twelve months. That would all be lost. And then, why, the railroad concessions alone could be made to yield twenty millions, if properly handled, and the manganese deposits around Santiago are worth about half as much more. We have also agreed to float a new five per cent. loan, which will stand us 71 after they have got their percentage, and we can market it easily around 85 or 86."

"I wouldn't mind getting in on that," laughed the Senator, "on the ground floor, of course," he added, quickly.

"That could be fixed all right, but we are not going into the loan unless we have the concessions first. The worst of all, however, is the blamed uncertainty of our administration. They talk like saints in nightgowns, but the next minute they may blow the lid off. You can never figure on anything sure a week ahead. How do you size up the situation?"

"Hm, no question things look queer. The air is full of mystery. In fact, our people do not know themselves where they stand. The President is honest in his desire to prevent war, but suppose we are forced into a position where we have to fight?"

"I don't catch your meaning, Senator," said the banker.

"The State Department is very much concerned over some confidential reports about peculiar movements in the capitals of Europe, whose point is directed against us. The real purpose of these intrigues does not seem to be fully developed. At least that is what we are told. I tried to pump St. Pierre. He was apparently very frank in denying any knowledge of such intrigues, and at the same time so confidential in other directions that I suspect he wanted to dodge and conceal the main thing from me."

"What is the nature of these reports at the State Department? Do they have any definite information?" inquired the banker, intensely interested.

"All I know about it is this. Some time ago Assistant Secretary Crane was tipped off by the British Ambassador that recently great activity had been displayed in Paris and Rome. Lord Florian mentioned that high Catholic influences were at work to heal the breach between the French Government and the Vatican, offers being made for a compromise on the Church question. At the same time he hinted that the Austrian Ambassador in London had sounded Downing Street as to its probable attitude in case of war, and that the answer had been non-committal, which does not look favorable for us.

"Very soon after that came a report from our Embassy in Paris, giving the substance of a talk in which the French foreign minister had expressed his

concern about the effect on French investments in Spanish securities if war should break out. Of course, there is nothing really tangible, but it was a broad hint."

"Of course the State Department took immediate steps to get further particulars?"

"Yes, Crane is watching developments carefully, but so far nothing definite has come. It takes a good while to feel the world's pulse, and our diplomats have neither the experience nor the ability of their European colleagues."

"Then your conclusion is that events are making for war?" The financier did not conceal his concern.

"The crows caw when a storm is coming, and European chancelleries are as delicate weather indicators as the birds," replied the Senator.

"All assurances I get point the other way," remarked Butworth, gloomily, "and I had hoped they were trustworthy."

The banker thought deeply for a few moments. Then he looked firmly at his companion. "Say, Fairmount, I want to speak very frankly to you. As a member of the Foreign Relations Committee you have great influence with the administration. It is of the highest importance for me and my associates that hostilities should be postponed as long as possible—if war cannot be avoided altogether—at least for two or three months. Will you help us in this affair? I shall make it a personal matter to see that you are well taken care of in the company which will control the concessions. Keep me posted

on further developments, will you?" His voice dropped down to a whisper as he noticed that the two diplomats, who seemed to have finished their talk, were coming toward them.

"All right, I will," nodded Senator Fairmount, and then all four gentlemen joined in a general conversation, slowly walking back to the tapestry room, whence the low murmur of voices and occasional peals of laughter penetrated even to the quiet library.

CHAPTER XI

REMINISCENCES OF A BATHING PARTY

IN the tapestry room the social whirl was in full swing, new guests still arriving from the theater or late dinner parties. Stewart Blake, having dined with Admiral Crunfield, had come on with his chief to the reception. It was late when they arrived, and now Blake, surrounded by a little group of his old friends, was busily responding to a fire of eager questions, while the Admiral, not far away, was engaged in more earnest conversation with Mrs. Butworth.

"Indeed, I appreciate that fully, Admiral," she was saying, with a pleasant smile at the great strategist who towered stiffly before her, looking every inch the martinet he was, notwithstanding the civilian evening dress which sat upon his spare frame like a uniform. "Your minds are so intensely occupied with wars and rumors of wars that you can hardly find a minute for us. But really you should give the young officers a chance,—we need dancing men."

"All due deference to beautiful woman," Admiral Crunfield bowed with precise gallantry,—*"I recognize your claims on our officers,—but we need fighting men. And such cannot be trained on waxed boards quite as effectively as on shipboard."* He gave a staccato chuckle to evidence his supreme approval of this nautical witticism.

Mrs. Butworth tapped the Admiral's arm lightly with her fan, casting a sharp, quick glance at the little group close by. "Mr. Blake has been absent for a long time. Do you expect to keep him on duty here, or will he be ordered away again?"

"Blake is one of our best officers. It would be a mistake to keep him long on office duty. He is too valuable."

"I dare say he is," remarked Mrs. Butworth, complacently. "Naturally an officer must be employed for the work he is best adapted to perform." The slow movement of her jeweled fan indicated serene satisfaction. "But you should have a number of young officers attached to the Department, Admiral. I imagine you would need them to assist you?"

"Haha! I perceive," the worthy Admiral cocked his eye shrewdly, "Blake is not a 'dancing man'? Not very useful on a parquettèd floor? I believe, my dear Mrs. Butworth, you could spare him if I let you have some midshipmen fresh from the Academy? Haha!"

"I remember Commander Blake is one of the few Annapolis men who do not care for dancing," nodded Mrs. Butworth, approvingly. "Of course I am interested in providing smart partners for our buds, and your young men, Admiral, are charming." A very sweet, very mellow smile radiated upon the great man whose single word could send naval officers scurrying all over the inhabited globe: "I always did have a soft spot in my heart for the Navy."

Highly pleased, for even great men of the crusty

naval type are amenable to the flattery of gracious praise, the Admiral launched out on a wave of stilted compliments most gratefully received as proof of purpose accomplished by the lady who had professed her amiable partiality for his branch of the service. She knew the seed was properly planted, and she had promise of its successful germination. A little caution would never be amiss, she mused, while she listened with appreciative pleasantness to the Admiral's gallant phrases. Sometimes girls *did* indulge in romantic and impracticable notions, and Helen might not be free from that tendency. Stewart Blake's shadow had been unexpectedly projected upon her well-formed plans. His continued presence in Washington might possibly prove a seriously disturbing factor. Everything considered it was much better that he should perform some important duty elsewhere. Conscious of her social potency, Mrs. Butworth entertained no doubt that her skill in handling men would achieve the desired result.

The small group nearby had now disintegrated, and its component parts were disappearing in the general swarm, not unlike fleecy white summer clouds in azure skies, floating serenely, vanishing, re-forming, sailing on. Blissfully unconscious of the interest his person had aroused in two busy minds Commander Blake, around whom the little coterie had gathered, made his way deviously through the throng of gayly fluttering social butterflies, gliding carefully around gorgeous silken trains and side-stepping clouds of fluffy laces, eyes unobtrusively observant in every

direction, on watchful lookout for a graceful apparition in pale pink liberty satin, a proud, lovely face framed in a wealth of silken tresses, a pair of lustrous, pensive eyes that filled his reveries with silent longing.

Beyond a very brief and formal greeting Blake had found no opportunity for a chat with Helen Lane, who seemed uncommonly absorbed in her social duties. Now, when he finally managed to slip away from the friends who had so amiably detained him, Helen had vanished. Once or twice he had caught a glimpse of a delicate pink vision in the distance, but navigating judiciously to that point, with considerate regard for laces and ruffles and spangled chiffon, he found himself mistaken, and changed his course to renew the search. In this manner, with a casual friendly nod here and a few polite words there, he had gradually drifted back toward the entrance where Mrs. Butworth still held court.

Just then Prince Kropatchek and Viscount Ybarra re-entered the drawing-room, the Prince gesticulating merrily. The hostess beckoned to them with her fan.

"Prince, I want you to know Commander Blake, one of our gallant naval officers. Prince Kropatchek," she added, gracefully, turning to the Commander, "is the latest star to join our diplomatic galaxy."

"Madame flatter me too much," said the Prince, with a bow.

Ybarra stood rooted to the spot for an instant, as though he had been struck by a thunderbolt. Like a flash a succession of emotions played over his pallid

face, while he stared at Blake with coruscating eyes. But in an instant all outward show of his mental disturbance was blotted out by a cold conventional smile.

"——and Viscount Ybarra, first secretary of the Spanish embassy," continued Mrs. Butworth, completing her introduction.

The two gentlemen bowed somewhat stiffly, and for an instant there was a slight pause. Ybarra had had the advantage of Blake in being the first to recognize the other, but Blake's training stood him in very good stead, and there was no sign in his bearing of any emotion evoked by the unexpected and startling meeting.

"If I were not addressing the Viscount Ybarra," he said, smoothly, "I should think I had met again a Cuban friend from whom I parted suddenly in Venice some time ago."

He looked Ybarra frankly in the eyes as he spoke, and there was not a quiver of an eyelash to betray to the others the peculiar significance of his words.

"Perhaps, now, I am mistaken," Blake went on, calmly. "You were in Europe last fall, Viscount? Did you happen to visit Venice?"

The cool audacity of the thing somewhat daunted Ybarra, accustomed as he was to play that very game himself. And although Blake had given no indication in voice or manner of anything beyond his words, it became instantly evident to the others in the little group that some special meaning was conveyed by them to Ybarra alone. The atmosphere

was surcharged with a subconscious electricity that all felt though none could define.

Ybarra forced a little smile to his lips and replied, with a restraint that he could not entirely conceal: "I believe we did meet then, Commander Blake, and nothing could afford me more peculiar satisfaction than the opportunity of encountering you again."

Blake answered with steady coolness: "I assure you, Viscount, I have much regretted that our acquaintance was so brief, and that my unexpectedly sudden departure deprived me of the pleasure of another meeting."

"The regret is all on my side," returned Ybarra, with such stress on that "all" as made Blake tighten his grip on himself. "I remained a week in Venice waiting to hear from you."

"An unlooked-for order to return home on the 'Louisville,' which left Venice that night, forced me to disappoint you," said Blake, willing to go that far in explanation, not so much for Ybarra's sake as to maintain the appearance of a mere friendly meeting before the others.

"Why, how pleasant," chimed in Mrs. Butworth, ready to fulfill her social duties elsewhere, "that you two gentlemen meet again here in Washington. You will have opportunity to see much of each other during the season, and exchange reminiscences," and with a kindly nod and smile she swept grandly away to another group of guests.

Kropatchek, all in the dark as to the meaning of

the incident, but feeling intuitively that it was a delicate situation, took upon himself the burden of leading the conversation into smooth channels.

"Ah, iss it not?" he asked, interestedly. "And you have met in Venice, really? A place so beautiful! And the moonshine, it is so very vunderful on the Canale Grande, Ah-h-h! I remember vhen I vas there some time ago, I observed such a funny happening, Commander. One evening I vent in a gondola on the Canale Grande—you have been on the Canale Grande, yes? It vas a very beautiful night, vith such a little moonshine to make it so romantic. In a distance before us vas another gondola. Some men vere talking very loud; *alors* one of them jumped in the air and made a splash in the vater, like a big frog flying. I said to the gondoliere: 'Quick, go up there, they kill a man!'

"'Only a pig of a foreigner. They fish him out vith a hook by his trousers,' he said to me."

Commander Blake suppressed a smile. Ybarra glanced uneasily about him, twisting his mustache. "An absurd story," he remarked, in an undertone.

"Beg your pardon?" asked the Prince.

"Oh, nothing. These gondoliers are absurd persons, I said," was Ybarra's nonchalant reply.

"Yes, so absurd," confirmed the Prince. "I vas very angry, and said: 'Pig of a foreigner? I am a foreigner too, am I a pig also?' '*Mille 'scusi, Eccellenza,*' he said, 'you have not the capacity of a pig, you are very narrow.' Haha! 'You are very narrow,' he said to me. Not so bad? Hahaha!"

Ybarra's dark brow showed his disgust with the narrative plainly enough; but the Prince, relishing his own story too much, paid no attention, and continued:

"And then came one more big splash. 'They are taking a bath, Eccellenza,' said the gondoliere. 'A bath in the Canale Grande in November?' I said, hahaha! 'Si, si, Eccellenza!' said the gondoliere, and he laughed with his big white teeth from one ear to the other, 'and the constabulari vill come, ve vill turn around——' "

"Excuse me a moment, gentlemen," said the Viscount, abruptly, and walked over to a stout old dowager whom he engaged in conversation with the most profuse amiability.

" '——and go away,' " the Prince concluded, without noticing in his eager effort to conquer an obstreperous foreign language that Ybarra had left them.

Blake no longer repressed his merriment. He thoroughly appreciated the caricature of his own adventure and the ludicrous manner in which it was presented by this guileless spectator. Prince Kropatchek, accepting the Commander's hilarity with visible satisfaction as a tribute to his own accomplishment as a raconteur, joined in the laugh with his crackling voice.

"You didn't make the personal acquaintance of the bathers, Prince?" inquired Blake.

Kropatchek shook his head. "I had not the pleasure, and I so regret, because I have such a good medicine for rheumatism which I would recommend

them. They must have the rheumatism, you think not, Commander? Hahaha! A bath in the Canale Grande in November!"

"Medicine is what they need," said Blake, laughingly, "a strong brand and plenty of it. You are not looking for them here, Prince Kropatchek?" he added, pointedly, as he observed the Prince glancing wonderingly around him.

"Where iss Ybarra?" came the Prince's counter-question. "He vas here the minute ago. It iss surprising."

"The Viscount was in a hurry to pay his compliments to an attractive elderly lady," Blake made a sweep of his hand, "somewhere——"

"Always the *homme galant*. When I saw him the first time previously he vas making the compliments to a beautiful *young* lady." The Prince shook his head doubtfully, his eyes still wandering about. "Iss he not the versatile man *par excellence*?"

"Versatile, I should say. Might call it slippery," remarked Blake, in an undertone.

"Beg your pardon?" said Kropatchek.

"Guess he must have slipped off," replied Blake, a little louder. "Hello, Percy!" turning to shake hands with young Wyndham, who just then stopped beside him and lightly touched his elbow for recognition. "What's become of the gold mining? I thought you had gone back to Mexico again. Prince Kropatchek, you know Mr. Wyndham?"

The Prince nodded, blinking cheerfully through his gold-rimmed glasses, and extending his hand to Percy.

"Certainly, Prince Kropatchek! Glad to meet you again!" said Wyndham, with breezy frankness. "Yes, indeed, I've been thrown with the Prince quite a good deal since I came from down South. But how are you, Blake? Have you been here all this time? Funny I haven't run across you since you did that wonderful rescue stunt for Helen."

For a few minutes the talk continued about immaterial things in a dilatory manner, when Prince Kropatchek again became obviously restless. He paid but indifferent attention to the conversation, and instead his spectacles circled around like two miniature searchlights. "I think I must look for the Viscount," he mumbled, half to himself. Then, addressing Percy, with some concern: "You have not observed your sister, where she iss now?"

"I believe she went to the pasture a while ago."

"Beg your pardon?" The Prince screwed up his eyebrows. "The Pastor? Who is the Pastor?"

"No, no, Prince! I said 'pasture,'" Percy grinned. "Excuse the slang, I meant the buffet."

"Ah," beamed the Prince, very much relieved that there were no new complications fronting him in the shape of additional admirers of Miss Wyndham? "I think I must also go to the 'pasture,' hahaha! It iss the necessity to complete a vacancy," and his spider-like arm describing a short curve, he placed his hand somewhere in the region which might have been supposed to indicate either his heart or his stomach. Nodding cheerfully he disappeared with alacrity.

Percy Wyndham was chatting inconsequentially

about his gold mining prospects in Mexico when Blake, whose eyes seemed to be occupied with some interesting observations at a distance, suddenly interrupted, without looking at him:

"Do you know anything about this Viscount Ybarra whom the Prince mentioned?"

"Ybarra? Yes, I know him, in a way," answered Percy. "He's a funny sort of a chap; very pleasant as a rule, sometimes too much so to suit me. I've been brushing up my Spanish with him. He's the fellow for moods, though. Changes like lightning from one second to the other. S'pose that's the southern temperament. I really couldn't say whether I like him or not. He's always been very nice to me, but I've heard others say he's a good deal of a snob. He certainly has a way of sneering at people he don't like that is ugly. Powerful sweet on the girls, though, I tell you. They're awfully struck on him; he wraps them around his fingers, nearly all of them."

"Yes, yes," assented Blake. Apparently he wanted to reply, but was at a loss what to say. Then, a moment later: "Isn't that Miss Lane over there? I think I'll speak to her for a minute."

"All right, I'll go you," replied Percy, happily unconscious of the frowning side glance Commander Blake cast at him. "She's a bully one, any way. I like her, don't you?"

CHAPTER XII

“REMEMBER THE MAINE!”

THE distinguished assemblage in the great tapestry room had considerably thinned out by this time, for the sumptuous buffet-supper served in the gorgeously appointed dining-hall exerted its subtle allurements, and many of the men sought the library for a smoke and a chat. Helen had found momentary relief from the constant social activity which was expected of her as chief aide to the hostess, and one of the deep window recesses afforded a welcome place of refuge. Even now she had passed through a strenuous ordeal. Viscount Ybarra, clever, smooth, and, if anything, more effusive than usual, had claimed her for an interminable ten minutes, taxing her endurance to the straining point. This was their first meeting after that trying hour in this very room but a few days previous. Ever since then she had looked forward with vague dread to the possibility of such a meeting. She had hoped that he might have decided to avoid her, for she had not encountered him at a number of functions which ordinarily he would have attended. But her hope was doomed when, to her dismay, the Viscount entered the Butworth drawing-room this evening, apparently quite unconcerned, very self-reliant, and as gay and brilliant as ever. Then she felt intuitively that he must have come for some well-

defined purpose of his own, and that he would seek her out whenever he deemed the moment opportune. And she prepared to meet him, inwardly a-flutter, but forearmed and courageous.

However, the Viscount's bearing was a puzzle. When he finally met Helen alone his conversation maintained the average level of customary drawing-room talk, redundant with pleasantries and harmless gossip; not a word, not even the faintest allusion reminiscent of that mortifying scene. In spite of her vivid aversion to him she marveled at his *sang froid*, the sublime assurance of this astute actor who made conversation with the graceful familiarity of an old friend certain of his welcome.

The Viscount's demeanor convinced Helen that he had by no means abandoned his intentions, but perhaps meant to proceed on other lines. And being constantly on the watch for a suspicious move on his part, the strain threatened to wear her out. With immeasurable relief, therefore, yet puzzled withal, she nodded a formal adieu when he finally uttered the polite formula which preceded his withdrawal, without having transgressed the boundaries of social commonplace in the least degree. But she barely stifled a tell-tale sigh when, a few moments later, Mrs. Butworth whispered to her, in passing:

"I see you are getting on splendidly with the Viscount. You are a dear, sweet girl, Helen."

Aunt Jane's amiable words of approval stung the girl sharply. That oppressive fear which Ybarra's

ominous remarks had kindled was re-awakened and took possession of her anew.

Helen's solitude was not destined to be of long duration, for she had hardly settled down comfortably in the cushions of the window seat, half hidden by the heavy damask hangings, when a willowy form in canary velvet was wafted into her sequestered haven. Lady Sarah, artistically demure, bent down to her:

"Did you have a *very* pleasant entertainment, Helen?" she whispered sweetly, with a saucy little upturn of her charmingly precocious nose.

My Lady had hovered in the offing, so to speak, cruising cautiously about while the Viscount held the girl's attention, and now sailed in cheerfully.

Helen smiled diffidently, a faint color rising. "You saw——?"

"Why, my dear, I have eyes, haven't I? Besides I could not possibly avoid noticing how cleverly he stalked you."

"I am glad *that* is over. I had dreaded it so much." This time the sigh was not suppressed.

"But after all it did not turn out so badly?" Lady Sarah's alert glance dwelt scrutinizingly on the girl's face.

On the point of replying, Helen halted and looked up. Stewart Blake and Percy approached the cozy retreat, and the former, advancing quickly, greeted the ladies with cordial courtesy.

"My first chance to-night, Miss Lane," he said, half-apologetically. "You were so constantly be-

sieged by everybody else that I did not have the courage to intrude."

With a swift impulsive movement Helen had turned to Blake as he spoke, a joyous glow heightening her color. "I am very glad to see you, Mr. Blake."

Her glance seemed to convey a deeper meaning, a greeting intended quite exclusively for him, perhaps a silent reproach for his tardiness in seeking her out; and the consciousness of this subtle understanding thrilled him.

Not far away Viscount Ybarra lingered among a group of young people in vivacious conversation. From time to time a casual side glance crept surreptitiously over toward the window recess where he had left Helen Lane. A deep frown clouding his brow marked the advent of Blake, and his sly attention was doubled when he observed the patent contrast between his reception and the cordial welcome which the American naval officer received. The bitter hatred of that man boiled up again with redoubled force. His hands clenched nervously in his pockets, but with an effort he preserved a cool front, carrying on a conversation which did not interest him in the least.

The real state of affairs now seemed quite plain to him. This American nobody was his rival; apparently his successful rival. His compressed lips imprisoned a silent oath. This fellow seemed to cross his path everywhere. Yet a second later his discreet titter mingled with the gay laughter of those around

him, while an impotent craving for revenge gnawed at his heart.

"Indeed, Aunt Jane's receptions seem to increase in popularity," Helen remarked, with a little smile which seemed to Commander Blake the loveliest he had ever seen. "I am pleased for her sake, for she loves to have lots of nice people come."

"And you?" asked Blake.

"I? Oh, I am very fond of it, too, of course," came the reply. But then, almost instantly, the vivid light faded from her eyes. A shadow of shyness seemed to pass over her, leaving a strange constraint as she added, with apparent irrelevancy: "Lady Edgethorne kindly came to my rescue when I was in danger of getting lonesome."

"Mr. Wyndham, have you seen Trummy lately?" Lady Sarah rose rather abruptly, speaking with pointed directness to Percy, who had remained modestly in the background. "I wager he has withdrawn into the desert of the smoking set and communes with one of his favorite long black cigars. You don't smoke those perfectly horrid things, Mr. Wyndham, do you? I can't understand why anybody does. I think I must rescue my poor misguided husband, Helen."

She turned her handsome, saucy head just the least little bit to one side, and as Helen looked up at her she became aware of something like a wink and the suspicion of a knowing smile, playing around My Lady's lips.

"I shall esteem it a privilege to guide you

to the smoking fraternity, Lady Edgethorne," said Percy.

Without further ceremony Lady Sarah took the lead, paying but scant heed to her escort, who trotted amiably along. They reached the door of the drawing-room as Don Pio de Camponero and M. de St. Pierre entered, returning from their confab in the library.

Lady Sarah halted. "How are the great Peacemakers?" she asked, treating the two eminent diplomats to a lovely little smile.

Don Pio stiffly drew back his head and gave her a cold stare. "*Enchanté! Enchanté!*" he snapped, haughtily, dropping his monocle with a jerky bow, catching it dexterously with two fingers and restoring it to its accustomed place under the right eyebrow; altogether a very neat and creditable performance which amused Lady Edgethorne immensely. Then he strutted on, without uttering another word.

St. Pierre, priding himself on being a good deal of a ladies' man, tarried a bit, evolving a pretty line of compliments on which Lady Sarah countered with whimsical grace. Then he trailed after Camponero.

"Cute old dears, both of them, aren't they?" said Lady Sarah, *sotto voce* to Percy.

"Great," laughed young Wyndham. "But why do you call them 'Peacemakers'?" Honest, I can't see much of the dove-and-olive branch combination in that pair. To me they seem like the Stormbirds that hover about a ship at sea, advance agents of a gale. God save the ship when they're around."

"Stormbirds?" Lady Sarah gave him a quizzical look. "You are really quite amusing, Mr. Wyndham, but you have missed your vocation," she said, pithily. "Instead of digging for gold you should devote yourself to the exploit of the Castalian spring. Your imagination is running riot." And they passed out into the hall.

Stewart Blake had availed himself of Helen's invitation to take the seat at her side which Lady Sarah so obligingly had vacated. Her invitation was cordially worded, but it impressed him somehow as reserved, if not distant. He longed for the frank friendliness of former days. The girl's attitude mystified him completely. Their conversation did not seem to find the right tone; it progressed awkwardly, in a strained manner. Helen appeared preoccupied, self-conscious, and Blake noted, with painful precision, the nervous movement of her slender white fingers playing aimlessly with the fan.

Their talk never went beyond the most inconsequential everyday topics. Her brief and obviously diffident answers to his remarks afforded him no clew, and her forced smile distressed him. It seemed as if a barrier had suddenly arisen between them. Once or twice he caught a veiled glance which strangely resembled a mute appeal, and that again made him wonder in a hazy sort of way.

Then a staggering thought flashed through his brain. He had seen Ybarra talking to her at some length—could it be that there lay the key to this situation? that she was in love with this intriguing

foreigner; that she had flirted with both Ybarra and himself, and now having made her choice in favor of the Spaniard was ready to drop him? Had she been playing a double game? Hardly had the thought entered his mind when he cast it off as unworthy of Helen and of himself. No, that appealing look which he had intercepted could not mean that. More likely she felt physically indisposed; the strain of social activity was telling on her, had worn out her nerves.

Blake had about concluded that it would be best to terminate the *tête-à-tête* and take his leave, when his attention was deflected by the approach of one of the servitors in blue and gold.

"A message for Admiral Crunfield, sir," said the lackey, in low, respectful tone. "Mrs. Butworth directed me to deliver it to Commander Blake, sir."

Blake took the missive, an official envelope marked "Urgent."

"Miss Lane, will you pardon me a few moments? I'm afraid this is something the Admiral should have without delay. Ah, there he is," observing Admiral Crunfield near the door, where Mrs. Butworth had intercepted him, both now scanning the scattered groups in the room.

"He seems to be looking for you. Aunt Jane probably told him," said Helen, and the young officer made straightway for his chief.

The Admiral took the envelope officiously from his aide and-stepped under one of the big crystal chande-

liers to examine its contents. One glance evidently sufficed to acquaint him with the purport of the message. An electric shock seemed to go through him. He squared his shoulders into martial pose, eyebrows contracted into one straight line, and the mustache bristling over the tightened lips.

"Incredible!" he muttered fiercely under his breath. Then he turned sharply to his aide: "Blake," in a half-loud, brusque voice, "hell has broken loose in Havana,—read this," handing him the slip of paper the envelope had contained.

Something of that intense utterance had been overheard by those nearest the Admiral, and a curious whispering arose, which was intensified when Commander Blake, hastily running his eyes over the fateful message, exclaimed:

"My God, sir! This is horrible!"

Banker Butworth, whose quick intelligence scented something that might be of interest to him, edged up closer to the Admiral, and several of the diplomats, among them Don Pio de Camponero, drew discreetly near, their curiosity aroused. A circle of a dozen eager people had formed around the two naval officers.

Senator Fairmount spoke up: "Admiral, is there——?"

The old sailor interrupted, his penetrating gaze fixed on Don Pio, who happened to stand opposite. "There is no use in concealing this terrible news," he said, with slow emphasis. "It would be public property anyway in a few hours. The battleship 'Maine'

has been blown up by an explosion in the harbor of Havana!"

The effect of the announcement was stunning. For an instant an awed silence held the fashionable assemblage like a spell. Then an intense buzzing arose, and batteries of horrified glances centered on the Spanish Ambassador, who, for the moment, seemed completely dazed. His face ashy, he almost staggered. Close behind him Viscount Ybarra, eyelids lowered to hide the exultant glow, touched Don Pio's arm roughly to recall him to the consciousness of his surroundings.

The Admiral wheeled around: "Come, Blake, we shall have to go to the Department at once," and bowing stiffly to everybody in general he started off.

Blake cast a fleeting glance about him. He became aware of a pair of lustrous eyes resting upon him with an expression of anxious concern, almost apprehension. A silent bend of the head, and he quickly followed his superior out of the room.

There was a brief whispered exchange between Don Pio and Ybarra, and then they too withdrew, with hasty formal *adieux* to the hostess.

Senator Fairmount caught the banker by the arm and drew him aside: "What do you think of this muss, Butworth?"

"A fine parcel of thugs and cut-throats, that's what they are!" exclaimed the banker, mopping his brow excitedly. "What's your guess, Fairmount?" he breathed, heavily.

"The whole thing will come to a head, I fear. You're not going to pay that two hundred thousand?"

"Not on your life!" Then, after a moment's rumination, very decisively: "By George, I'll go down to Havana and find out for myself. I'll wire Captain Polk to bring the 'Isona' up to Norfolk right away and prepare for a cruise. I'll do it to-night!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHADOWS BY THE WALL

"THE Spanish Ambassador's carriage!" bawled the stentorian voice of a giant in blue and gold from the portal of the Butworth residence into the gusts of rain fast turning into snow.

Horses' hoofs clattered on the mushy pavement. The grinding of wheels stopped abruptly and a liveried servant with the red-yellow cockade on his castor hat threw open the carriage door as soon as the tall form of Don Pio de Camponero, up to the nose in furs, followed by Viscount Ybarra, emerged from the canopy.

They entered the carriage; the Ambassador perplexed, glum, and moody, still half-dazed by the shock of the appalling news, much as a man who has been suddenly whisked into the air by a tornado and dropped at a distance where now, with aching limbs, battered and sore and impotently scowling at the ruthless forces of nature, he tries in a hazy way to take inventory of the assets remaining. And Don Pio's soreness was most painfully acute, for it centered in his most tender spot, his bank account.

Ybarra's face resembled a waxen image, but his eyes were sultry with excitement, nervous fingers twisting the silky mustache.

A sharp bang of the carriage door, the liveried

servant sprang back to the box seat, and the horses fell into a brisk trot down Massachusetts Avenue.

Two peaked shadows peeled off from the darkness of a narrow side street; swiftly moving figures, swishing after the carriage through the squashy snow, and keeping pace with it on their bicycles a short distance in the rear, under cover of the trees on either side of the avenue.

For a while the two men in the carriage were as silent as the two dark and ghostlike shadows trailing behind them in the slush; Ybarra watching his superior shrewdly from the corner of his eye.

Presently Don Pio broke the silence: "Confounded folly!" he groaned. "Now we are forced to more humiliating apologies. This asininity may wreck all our efforts to bring about the desired solution. It will stir them up as nothing else has done. What excuses can we offer?"

"It may have been an accident for which they are responsible themselves," Ybarra remarked, with indifference.

"You take the matter very coolly," Don Pio flared up. "Can you not see the tremendous effect of this catastrophe? You must cable to Havana for explanations! Immediately! We must have something to present to the State Department to-morrow to allay the excitement. The press will howl and the jingoes in Congress——"

"It is water on their mill, of course," replied Ybarra, quietly. The darkness in the carriage obscured the half contemptuous, half triumphant smile

hovering about his lips. "We have to be prepared for an upheaval of public opinion. But possibly we may drag the matter along by explanations and subterfuges until we are ready to meet the crisis."

"But we are not ready! Nothing is ready! We dare not face a crisis for months to come. We have no means at our disposal to check it!"

"Calm deliberation is of first importance, Your Excellency," was Ybarra's impudent comment. "We should not get flustered. The plans for the European coalition have so far advanced that an alarm of this kind will bring matters to a focus. Then we are perfectly safe."

The Viscount's insolent indifference irritated the Ambassador to the point of explosion. He was about to give vent to his emotion when that indefinable, creepy feeling, which ever seemed to fasten on him in Ybarra's presence, stifled the outburst in its inception. He muttered something inaudible and relapsed into silence, pondering over the events of the evening.

What influence would this affair have on the financial prospects which he had just been discussing with Butworth? Would the banker be scared off? If only that \$200,000 had been deposited the whole thing would be more or less indifferent to him, also. Why couldn't these idiots have waited twenty-four hours? Then they might have blown up the entire American navy for all he cared. He would have contemplated war or peace with like equanimity; the situation would then have yielded its harvest, and

whatever happened his ship would have been safe in port with its load of gold. But now! These asses! —Still, as Ybarra suggested, there might be a chance for staving off the crisis. No time should be lost in taking steps toward that end, not a minute!

“Prepare a cable to Blanco and send it at once,” the Ambassador ordered. “Tell him that it is imperative to have explanations immediately, that the situation is critical in the extreme.”

They had reached the embassy, and the two gentlemen alighted.

“Horrible!” shuddered Don Pio, as he quickly entered his residence. Ybarra followed leisurely. Whether the remark was connected with the thoughts that had just agitated Don Pio’s mind or referred to the surrounding atmospheric conditions might be a matter of conjecture. The weather certainly would have deserved this derogatory epithet in fullest measure. For the rain storm of the early evening had by this time developed into a veritable blizzard. Fine snow driven in squalls by the gusts of high wind which whistled dolefully through the bare tree-tops and around the cornices; a bleak pall enshrouding nature to the accompaniment of a monotonous dismal dirge.

The moment when the carriage halted, those two peaked shadows also stopped, at a safe distance, where the garden wall of a neighboring mansion afforded cover. A long time they kept their post, discoursing in whispers, peering carefully from time to time in the direction of the embassy building.

"The carriage has gone to the stable; they won't go out any more to-night," one of them remarked to his companion at length.

"Not likely in this kind of weather," replied the other. "I'll go down and report to 'Old Specs.' You stay and watch the rear entrance until the lights are out."

Then he mounted his wheel and in a twinkling was lost to sight, swallowed up by the whirling snow.

CHAPTER XIV

THE THUMBSCREWS

"A DREARY night," remarked the captain of the Treasury Watch to his subordinate, peering out into the dark from the huge portico of that vast stone pile that harbors the wealth of a nation.

"Dreary enough, makes me shiver," replied the other. "If we could only keep the doors shut it might be comfortable all right, but to stand here at the gate with the wind and the snow coming in every time those old swingers move is no fun. And those fellows up on the third floor jump in and out all the time."

"Orders are orders," said the captain. "There must be something doing or they wouldn't be sitting up after midnight the way they've been doing these two weeks and more."

"Counterfeiters?" suggested the watchman.

"I don't know. They're on to some game or other, you never can tell. They won't open their mouths about such things."

"Must be counterfeiters," mused the watchman.

"Don't you remember about two years ago when they chased that Italian gang that had shed bogus ten dollar bills all over the country? This old place was like a bee hive, same as now, and 'Old Specs' used to sit in his room till all hours. Then they got

'em and things quieted down for a while. Did you see Merritt bring in one of those suspicious looking Dagos an hour ago; young fellow with a face like the yolk of an egg?"

Shuffling sounds of footsteps outside. A moment later the swinging doors were pushed open and a man muffled up to his ears in a big ulster, appeared at the inner gate, wrought of stout iron bars.

"It's him," whispered the watchman, hurrying to unlock the gate.

"'d evening," grunted the newcomer, as a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles glinted out of the depths of the upturned coat collar at the captain of the watch. "Has Stone come in?"

"Good-evening, chief," saluted the captain, respectfully. "Yes, Stone came in about half an hour ago. Merritt and Bourke are upstairs, too, with a young man."

"Very well," nodded the man in the ulster and glided down the dimly lighted corridor, where he melted away in the gloom.

"A queer one, ain't he?" commented the watchman, as he carefully locked the gate.

In a small room on the third floor of the big gray stone pile the huge ulster was cast aside revealing a slender, spare built man, apparently of middle age. Short cropped hair made his sharply cut features still more striking; bushy eyebrows protruding like bristles over the gold-rimmed spectacles put to shame the sparse yellowish apology for a mustache which fringed his thin, unemotional lips. "Old Specs," as

he had been dubbed by his irreverent subordinates, was really an uncomplimentary misnomer for this peculiar man. He certainly seemed neither old nor young. His features, immovable as if chiseled in stone, looked as if they must always have been the same and could never change in time to come.

He sat down at a flat-top desk illuminated by a drop light which was provided with a movable reflector shade, enabling the person at the desk to throw a brilliant stream of light on any part of the room by simply turning a knob in various directions. Some large glass cases lining the wall showed a motley collection of strange and grewsome articles. There were complete sets of counterfeiters' contrivances, dies and melting pots, neatly engraved plates, together with all kinds of engravers' tools; death masks; pistols, daggers, stilettos and other weapons; handcuffs and many more things, all provided with numbered labels bearing brief historical references.

The chief pressed a button, and a broad-shouldered, good-looking individual, hardly past thirty, with the appearance and mien of a well-to-do small tradesman entered the room.

"Good-evening, chief," he said, cheerily, "hope you find yourself quite comfortable."

"Stone," remarked the chief, sternly, his eyes making a passing stab at the man, "you need not practice on me. Leave your frills outside when you come in here."

"All right, chief," grinned the other, "it's just to keep my hand in."

“Come to business. What have you to report?”

“They’ve become a good deal more active the last week or so, as I mentioned to you last night, chief, and conferences have been going on continuously at one embassy or another,” said Stone, “but to-day was the star performance. They’ve kept me hopping. It started early, but I had my men on the spot. I got the report early in the afternoon, and had time to verify most of it, besides getting some information myself on the side. I am in the collection business just now, and also sell jewelry on the installment plan to reliable servants in the best houses. I have some good customers in several of the embassies.”

The chief looked at him steadily without moving a muscle.

“The Frenchman drove to the British embassy in the morning and stayed for quite some time. After a while the Austrian Ambassador came walking from across the way. He had been telephoned for, as I learned later. The three were together for better’n half an hour, and the Austrian left about noon. A little later the German Ambassador, Count Edelsheim, came and stayed for about fifteen minutes. At half-past one the Frenchman and Lord Florian walked over to the Austrian embassy, had lunch there, and left about three. In the evening nearly the whole bunch went to Mrs. Butworth’s reception. I was around there and left a short while ago.”

“What have you learned about the object of these meetings?”

"Putting one thing and another together, chief, they are trying to get to some agreement how they can take a stand together to help Spain out in this Cuban business. Nearly all the talk, as far as I could judge from scraps of conversation brought to me was about the Monroe Doctrine. The French Ambassador, St. Pierre, and the Austrian brought it out that they had to have a European Monroe Doctrine and that they should stand together and make representations to our government about it."

"The lunch party at the Austrian embassy was a stag affair," the detective continued, "the ladies remaining upstairs. The men were so intent on their talk that they discussed their business even at table. The main trouble appeared to be about the Russian, who wasn't there and who wouldn't come for any conference, because he had no instructions from home. And the German, that's what Lord Florian told the others, wouldn't come into the game if the Russian wasn't pulled in. So they chewed the rag and chewed the rag, until they came to the conclusion that some one should see the German in the afternoon to make sure of him and have him drag the Russian in too."

"Have they accomplished it?"

"That I don't know, but I don't think so, because the Austrian Ambassador went to the German embassy after the other two had left, and came away alone. When he walked down the terrace on Massachusetts Avenue he had a face like a thunder cloud and muttered to himself in German. Close to five o'clock he and the Frenchman met at the Spanish

embassy. The rest of them weren't there. This makes me suppose that there is a hitch in the game."

The chief pondered a moment. "That conversation at the luncheon table is not just guesswork, Stone?"

"It certainly is not. Scraps of the talk were picked up by the butler and brought down to the servant room where I was sitting. There they talked about it. And in the same way I heard how the talk upstairs was continued over the coffee in the Ambassador's study, where they generally play bridge."

"Did you get any more details?"

"Only just what I told you, chief."

"Very well, write a careful report and bring it here in the morning. Go right at it now, while your memory is fresh."

Another short jerk of the head and the chief busied himself again with the papers before him, some of which he sorted out. Then he touched the electric button again. Instantly a messenger appeared.

"Tell Merritt I want him," ordered the chief, without looking up.

A minute later the detective entered with a young man whose wrists were securely locked together with handcuffs, showing that he was suspected of being a desperate customer. Yet, at first glance, there was nothing in the appearance of the young fellow to mark him as such. He looked but a miserable, uncouth piece of humanity, gathered at random from the flotsam tossing about on the turbid billows of Metropolitan life; a pale, thin, sallow, almost boyish face,

with tousled swabs of bushy black hair hanging down to his brows and all but covering the dark, unsteady eyes, which here and there shot sulky glances from underneath the heavy, half-closed lids; the eyes of a sneak-thief or pickpocket. Alongside the tall, gaunt, hard-featured detective who accompanied him he appeared quite insignificant; more like an overgrown boy who has been caught stealing apples from a fruit stand than a dangerous character, had it not been for those deep-seated, restless eyes, which gave warning of a mind matured in perversity far beyond the probabilities of his youthful appearance.

"What about him?" asked the chief, surveying the prisoner with a short glance that bored through his face into his very brain.

"Spanish spy," replied the detective, laconically. Then he added, for further explanation: "Seems to have been mixed up with a lot of shady things."

"His history," curtly commanded the superior.

"A couple of weeks ago, as you remember, Bourke and I went down Delaware Bay to investigate a schooner lying in a secluded spot below Havermills, reported to be loading arms and munitions for a filibuster to Cuba. The report had stated that a party of men were to go aboard together with the outfit, so that the expedition would come under the neutrality provisions. We located the schooner after a good deal of search through those marshy bottoms, which are overgrown with willows and all sorts of underbrush. When we first sighted her, about sundown, there seemed to be nothing doing. We

watched her for the night and the best part of the next day without further developments than seeing a watchman pacing up and down the deck. In the afternoon of the second day things began to happen. A mule team was driven down there with a lot of heavy boxes, evidently part of the ammunition. The boxes were taken aboard. Then, about dusk, several more teams followed with other boxes of different sizes, some probably containing small field pieces.

"While they were hoisting the stuff aboard the schooner we noticed suspicious movements in the underbrush around on the other side of the ship, and pretty soon we could distinguish two fellows who seemed to be watching like we were, only a good deal more curious, for they sneaked pretty close to the one mule team that still remained after the others had driven off. They crawled as close as they could get without coming into the open. It was getting dark then——"

"Yes, I remember that expedition very well. Come to the point," interrupted the chief, somewhat sharply, indicating impatience, "what has this fellow to do with it?"

"I'm coming to that, chief," replied the other, undisturbed by the rebuke. "Bourke and I crawled through the brush and reached the other side in a roundabout way. We saw those two chaps making their way toward the ship where all hands had gone after unloading the wagon, probably to help stow the truck. One of the two fellows carried a dark object, the nature of which we couldn't tell at that distance.

We got as near as we could under cover of the brush and then made a run for them. This fellow was one of them. He carried that dark thing, a little box like a cigar box, and flung it from him as he started to run. I struck out after him while Bourke went after the box. This fellow's pal was out of sight by that time, and no use following him up. I came pretty close to this duck and got a good look at him, especially——"

"It was pretty dark, you said?" the chief broke in.

"Yes, pretty dark, but you don't let me finish," came the rather gruff retort. "I was about to say that the moon was coming up, so I could see him pretty well. When I was a few paces away, getting ready to grab him, he put his hand in his pocket and threw something at me. I dodged and lost a little time by stopping. That gained enough for him to tumble down a small embankment and get so far ahead that he could make his escape in the brush, for in following him I stumbled down that embankment, which I did not see in time, and rolled around in the brush for a few moments. What he threw at me, I saw afterward, was a paper of red pepper. I found some of the stuff on my coat. When he threw it I had noticed something queer about his hand, but didn't think anything more about it at the time, and not, in fact, until I caught my man to-night. You see?" He held up the prisoner's manacled hands, "That's the hand. The middle finger is missing."

The prisoner hardly moved during the whole re-

cial, as though he were not aware of its import, and he offered no resistance when the detective took hold of his hands, staring stolidly with half-shut eyes at the floor.

"They both escaped," continued the detective, "and the box, as you will remember, proved to be one of those infernal machines, but very clumsily constructed. They meant to blow up the ship, of course."

"I remember," said the chief, curtly.

"Now the other night I happened to pass along Dupont Circle, and there I saw this fellow again. I recognized him at once when he passed under a lamp post. He was walking toward Massachusetts Avenue. I followed him and observed him for a while loitering around the Butworth residence. He did not do anything in particular, and I lost sight of him in the darkness. Then I watched for him regularly in that vicinity, and to-night I collared him in the alley back of the Butworth house. Thought I'd better bring him here for your inspection."

"What does he say he was doing?"

"He don't say anything at all. Makes believe he don't understand United States. Haven't been able to get a word out of him. He fakes all right," and Merritt looked hard at the prisoner who never moved a muscle of his face, but stood there brooding, without any outward show of understanding what was going on around him.

"We had better make him talk," decided the chief, in a rasping voice. "Hey there, young fel-

low! You have heard what this man has told me? What have you to say about it?"

The prisoner appeared to realize that he was being addressed, for the chief had bawled the words right into his face. But a sullen glance of defiance was the only recognition, no other response.

"Deaf, are you? Or do you think you don't understand English, hey? Guess we'll give you a lesson." Turning to Merritt: "Open that case and let me have those little screws over there in that corner."

The detective went to the closet and took out a set of old-fashioned thumbscrews, probably relics of ancient New England witch-baiting times that had found their way somehow into the Secret Service collection. With a horrible grimace he placed them on the table in front of his chief. Ugly looking things they were, those rust-spotted old instruments of persuasion.

"Old Specs" took one of them in his hand and began to work the screw backward and forward. "Can see the blood spots on them from the last time they were used," he grunted, loud enough for the young fellow to hear. "Human blood makes queer rust spots, doesn't it, Merritt?"

"It certainly does," confirmed that raw-boned, hard-featured individual, with a grin which made the naturally unattractive lines of his face positively hideous.

"But they work well," the chief went on, slowly playing the screws. "Hardly need any grease."

"A little fresh blood will make 'em run smoother," commented Merritt, with ghastly humor.

Neither of the two men so much as looked at the youth standing beside the tall detective. They seemed completely engrossed with the subject of their talk.

The prisoner, standing in the shade and apparently unobserved by either the chief or the detective, had opened his eyes wide as Merritt placed those ugly irons on the table. An expression of terror came into his eyes and his cheeks blanched when the stony-faced man at the table began to manipulate them. But whatever thoughts might have sprung up behind those bushy swabs of hair, the youth did not betray them by a single sound or movement.

Presently, with a deft movement, "Old Specs" turned the movable shade of the drop light so that for the briefest moment the full strength of the lamp flashed on the prisoner's face, revealing the terror-stricken expression of his features. In a trice the light shining on the table as before. "Old Specs" was satisfied with what he had seen.

"Stand behind him and hold his arms in position while I try the screws," came the command, in that low, rasping voice, and Merritt did as he was bidden.

Then the chief took one of the screws, wheeled around slowly, and reached deliberately for the youth's manacled hands.

An inarticulate shriek broke from the prisoner's lips, and he fell on his knees, his whole body shivering in an agony of deadly fright, while Merritt, still

holding his arms with vise-like grip, was half dragged over by the sudden jerk.

"*Perdoneme! Perdoneme!*" wailed the youth, nearly choking with terror, "I will speak! I will speak!"

The chief deliberately resumed his chair. "Found your tongue, hey?" he rasped. Then, to Merritt: "Stand him up again. I believe he'll loosen up now."

Merritt lifted the youth up again, and, thoroughly demoralized by the clever sweat-box trick, the prisoner began to talk, haltingly and still all a-shiver.

Plied with searching questions by the chief himself, the youth admitted that he was in the employ of old Diego Sanchez, a servant of the Spanish embassy, and had been sent with another to watch the filibustering expedition in Delaware Bay; that they had devised that infernal machine on their own hook to destroy the ship, in the hope of a liberal reward, but were foiled by the detectives; that of late he had been employed by that man Diego to watch the Butworth residence and to report who visited there.

Repeated quizzing resulted in no additional information, and the chief fell to cogitating about the prisoner. What could be done with him? No doubt he was a bad sort of jailbird and had best be kept under lock and key behind solid iron bars. But how, under what pretense? He could not be made to disappear without ado. And he could not remain locked up anywhere for any length of time without due process of law. Besides there was no

place to put him. Now, should he be taken to a police court? The only charge that could be substantiated was that of vagrancy. He certainly was a suspicious person and would be held. After a while, however, he would have to be discharged, as there was no direct proof against him.

Such a proceeding might lead to awkward complications. The newspapers would get hold of the case, make a sensation out of it, drag all sorts of facts to light, compromise prominent people without necessity and perhaps even stir up new international trouble.

No, it wouldn't do at all. He had all the information out of the fellow that could be extracted. Better let him go and keep him under surveillance as long as possible, or scare him into leaving town. He probably would skip out and be careful not to be caught again.

"Old Specs" gave a wink to the detective and the two repaired to a window, where a whispered conversation took place.

"I think we've got everything that he can give up," said the chief. "There is no ground on which we can hold him. Take him out and let him run. I don't think he can do any particular harm at present. But keep your eye peeled for the little sneak."

"All right, chief."

The detective went over to the youth, who had watched the secret consultation with evident apprehension, and said, gruffly: "Come on!" Taking

him by the arm he led him downstairs, through the dim corridors, into the whirling snow without. There he unlocked the handcuffs.

"Now you run, sonny," was his grim admonition. "And you take care that you don't fall in with us again. If you follow my advice you will get out of town by the first train that leaves the depot. If we catch you another time it will go hard with you."

The youth needed no second invitation. With a few leaps he was down in the street and out of sight.

Just then the echo of muffled voices filled the air; voices far off, yelling indistinctly through the flying snow out into the silent night. The voices came nearer and nearer; newsboys running along the streets, stacks of papers under their arms and crying lustily:

"Extry! Extry! Extry *Post!* Extry *Star!* Battleship 'Maine' blown up by the Spaniards! All 'bout the turrble disaster in Havana! Extry paper! Five cents!"

And the slumbering city awoke. People poked their bewildered heads out of windows to ascertain the cause of the unwonted turmoil. Then they hastened to the doors and bought the papers which in brief lines told of the fearful catastrophe that had overwhelmed a proud ship and claimed the life of many a sturdy young sailor, doomed by an inscrutable Providence to perish through the dastardly act of faithless hospitality in Havana harbor.

CHAPTER XV

SUMMONED BY THE PRESIDENT

SEATED at his desk in the Navy Department the morning after the Butworth reception, Lieutenant-Commander Stewart Blake pored listlessly over the mass of papers and documents piled before him. For once his disciplined brain refused the task his will set it, and his thoughts ranged back and forth over the events of the previous evening as he pondered their significance. The first numbing shock of the disastrous news from Havana had passed away, and the Department was humming with the work that crowded upon it as a result of the loss of the battleship.

From the window beyond his desk Blake could see the entrance of the White House, where, already, the Secretary and Admiral Crunfield had gone to talk with the President. Subconsciously Blake noted the arrival of Senators and members of the House, anxious to discuss with the head of the nation this new phase of the Cuban situation. For despite the official reiteration that the explosion must have been caused by accident, there lurked in the back of every man's mind, civilian or official, the suspicious fear that after all, it might have been design—the crafty work of a secret enemy.

But something more than the explosion at Havana

occupied the thoughts of Stewart Blake and gave them a turn of sinister suspicion. At last he had the identity of that volatile Cuban who had dogged his steps through the European capitals a few months before; and, as he had believed then, the man was a Spanish agent. But he had not dreamed that when he at length learned the secret he would find that agent to have been high in the Spanish diplomatic service. And the audacity of the man in coming to Washington, of all places, so soon after that exploit, was simply staggering. There was something in it beyond the lines of what Blake had deduced from the information he had gleaned in his own secret travels. He had been seeking naval information only. Obviously this was a diplomatic game as well that Alvarez-Ybarra had been playing.

Suddenly he reached for his desk telephone. "Give me the chief clerk of the State Department," he said, when the operator answered his call. "Hello, State Department? Chief clerk? Is that you, Curtis? This is Commander Blake, bureau of navigation. Can you tell me how long Viscount Ybarra has been attached to the Spanish embassy here, and in what capacity?—Yes, please, look it up and let me know."

He turned from the telephone and drummed idly with his fingers on the desk. It was but a moment or so when the bell rang and he picked up the phone again. "Hello, yes, this is Blake; that you, Curtis? How long did you say? Two years?

Oh, came in November, '95. Thank you. No, that was all I wanted."

He dropped the receiver and stared out of the window toward the White House. "Two years and more," he said, half under his breath, "and I didn't know him. Now that's what comes of sending men on such work as mine who haven't had Washington duty. If I'd been here first I'd have known him as soon as I saw him." He drummed on the desk again. "Yes," he went on, "and he would have known me, too, and it would have been a fine mix-up. But as it was he suspected me, and I was in the dark about him. Now we both know.

"But do we? He knows who I am, and whatever suspicion he had about my business there is probably confirmed. But all I know of him is that he was watching me. What was he doing on his own account? That's the question. They couldn't have been planning then to blow up the 'Maine' for they didn't know we would send her, or any ship, to Havana. But he was up to some secret work and if anybody has plotted that explosion he's the man who knows about it."

The more Blake pondered the affair, the more certain he became that the battleship had been destroyed by an enemy, and that Ybarra had been aware, if not the chief instigator, of the crime. The motive, of course, was hatred of the Americans and desire to do them injury. Blake smiled bitterly at that thought, for he saw far beyond the mere explosion itself. That was only an incident, if once the American

people came to believe that their sailors had been wantonly murdered by a Spanish enemy? And with a grim compression of the mobile lips he thought of the terrible aftermath, and saw the elimination of Spanish power from the Western world.

But was mere hatred the motive? Could there be anything else, more far reaching? Was something like this needed to furnish the argument or pretext for another move? If so, what was it? Would the answer give any clew to the doings of Ybarra in Europe? Or would those doings give any clew to the answer? In the excitement produced by the first suggestion Blake had risen from his desk and was tramping about the room. Now he seated himself again, and, pushing back the pile of unheeded papers, began to go over the whole series of incidents, as far as he knew them, from the first.

-- "Pshaw!" he exclaimed, after a few moments, "what's the use of my trying to figure it out on the little I know. This needs somebody on the diplomatic side as well. I'll go and see Crane."

He was walking rapidly down the corridor of the great building, toward the State Department, when a messenger came running after him.

"Mr. Blake, sir," said the man, "they want you to come right over to the White House."

"What's that?" asked Blake, turning sharply back.

"Yes, sir, the President's secretary telephoned over to have you come right away to the President's office."

In two minutes Blake was walking up the broad stairway that led to the cabinet room and the President's office. Once or twice before when he had had occasion to see the President he had waited in the private secretary's office until the President was ready for him. But now as he reached the head of the stairs the President's messenger came briskly forward and directed him into the cabinet room. Blake knew that here it was where the President held his most important conferences, when he was not willing to be interrupted even by his private secretary.

The messenger opened the door and said, in a low but distinct voice:

"Lieutenant-Commander Blake!"

As Blake entered he saw the President sitting at the head of the cabinet table, with the Secretary of the Navy seated at the corner nearest him. Admiral Crunfield was standing between them, and they had evidently been engaged in serious conversation. There was an expression of weariness, tinged with sadness, on the face of the President, but he smiled at the Lieutenant-Commander and rose to greet him with outstretched hand.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Blake," he said, in his soft, courteous voice, "Admiral Crunfield tells me that you have some special information regarding Spanish activities abroad which may be important just now, in view of what has happened."

The Secretary and Admiral Crunfield bowed as the President finished speaking, and Blake at once

began to state the results of his observations abroad and the information he had gathered. He told the story briefly and concisely. Admiral Crunfield was familiar with every word of it, and the substance of it had been reported to the Secretary and the President. But all three seemed to derive new meaning from it now, and occasionally the President interrupted to ask a question or request further details. As Blake concluded the report of his European work Admiral Crunfield seemed about to make some suggestion, when the Commander added, deferentially:

"If you will pardon me, sir, there is one thing more of which I should like to speak."

At once the President leaned forward in his chair and said: "Go on, Mr. Blake, what is it?"

"It is a matter with which Admiral Crunfield is familiar, Mr. President. That is, he knows practically all that I knew up to last night. There was an entirely unexpected development then, sir,"—Blake turned as if in explanation to the Admiral,— "which I have not yet had opportunity to report to you."

"I have reported to Admiral Crunfield somewhat at length," continued Blake, turning again to the President and Secretary, "my suspicion that I was followed and watched by a Spanish spy during the latter part, if not all, of my European work last fall."

"Ah," interrupted the President, "I had not heard that. Tell me about it."

Again Blake went over the story, relating how

the man calling himself Alvarez, the Cuban, had been presented to him first in Paris; then how they had met in Berlin, again in Vienna, and the last time in Venice. The incident of the quarrel and the challenge in Venice Blake had never told even to Crunfield. Nor did he relate it now. His friend Thornton, captain of the "Louisville" had promised secrecy, and Blake was not disposed to bring that into the narrative, especially as he did not see how it could affect his work in any way or have any particular bearing on the relation between himself and the man who had tracked him. But when he had concluded his story of the action of the man whom he suspected to have been spying on him, he added:

"Last night for the first time I found out who the man is. We met at the Butworth reception and were formally introduced by Mrs. Butworth. We recognized each other instantly, and had some fencing about our last meeting in Venice. It was just a few moments before the word came of the loss of the 'Maine.' He is Viscount Ybarra, First Secretary of the Spanish embassy."

"Ybarra!" exclaimed both the Secretary and Admiral Crunfield, together.

"I have know him socially for a long time," added the Secretary. "What colossal audacity!"

The President said nothing at all to this disclosure, but his finger pressed a button in the table in front of him, and in prompt response his messenger entered from the hall.

"Major," said the President, "go yourself to the State Department and say to Mr. Crane that I desire to see him here at once. Whatever he may be engaged about may be postponed a little."

Then, as the messenger departed, the President turned to the others. "This is very singular," he went on, "and most interesting. I have not before heard of diplomats turning detective on their own account. I suppose, of course, I have met this Viscount Ybarra, but I do not recall him now. How long has he been here?"

"I was told at the State Department this morning that he had been here a little more than two years," replied Blake. "He was absent on leave for four months last fall, and it was understood at the Department that he was in Spain. But they had no reason for keeping track of him, and no one seems to have suspected what he was really doing or trying to do."

"What could he have learned by following you?" asked the President of Blake. "Admiral Crunfield has reported that you were very careful and that they have been unable to find out that anyone learned what you were about. Could this man have done it?"

"I do not know, Mr. President. He had one decided advantage of me. He had been in Washington for a year and a half or more just before going abroad. But I went directly from service on the Asiatic station. He probably knew some, if not all, of our naval attachés at least by sight. He may have

been informed through secret means who I was. If he did know that, and also had other means of watching me than his own efforts, it is just possible that he found out that I was in communication with our attachés.

"But he could not have learned what information they gave me, and I do not believe he could have learned the information I gathered from other sources. I never saw any of our attachés except at the embassies, where I was safe in calling in my rôle of a traveling American. I never discussed important matters with any of them where there was the least possibility of being overheard. On that point we were always most careful, so that even if servants in any the embassies had been corrupted they could not have spied on us to advantage. I am inclined to think that the limit of what he got was possibly confirmation of his suspicion that I was in the government service in some capacity seeking information as to the attitude of Europe toward us with regard to the Cuban situation."

As Blake finished the sentence the door opened and Assistant Secretary of State Crane, now virtually head of the Department, came in. He bowed to the President and the others, and said:

"Pardon my delay, Mr. President. I was engaged with the Viscount Ybarra and it was a moment or two before I could excuse myself."

"Ybarra!" exclaimed the others, almost in unison.

The diplomat glanced at them curiously as he noted the tone of surprise in their exclamation.

"Yes," he went on, "he had called on behalf of the Ambassador to assure me of the regret of his government over the explosion at Havana."

"It was of Ybarra that we desired to talk with you," put in the President, calmly. "Commander Blake has just told us some surprising things about him. It seems that he played the spy last fall and followed Mr. Blake about Europe, in the guise of a Cuban patriot."

"Ah," said Crane, thoughtfully. "That rôle is new to me. I had not heard of it before."

For a moment all five men were silent, each busy with the curious problem thus presented to them. They were aroused by the slight opening and soft closing of the door into the President's office, the certain signal that the private secretary had matter of importance to communicate to the President and was yet uncertain whether to interrupt him or not.

The President stepped to the door and threw it open. "What is it, Allison?" he asked.

In the instant that he stood there waiting for the secretary, the President saw his office filled with Senators, Representatives, and men of high importance in the life of the nation, all waiting for the opportunity to talk to him. Then his secretary put into his hand a sheaf of telegrams, first of which was a message from the captain of the great ship lying on the bottom of Havana harbor.

"Will you see any of the newspaper men later?" asked the secretary.

"I think not," replied the President. He turned to re-enter the cabinet room, but paused and spoke again to the secretary. "Tell them to wait," he said. "There may be something I can say by and by."

Then the door closed upon him again, and the conference in the cabinet room was resumed. They turned at once to the dispatches. Both the captain of the battleship and the Consul-General had announced the fact of her loss in earlier messages. Those dispatches and others had been given promptly to the press. Now both officials had cabled their Department chiefs matter far too important and too dangerous to the maintenance of peace for publication. Each reported his inability as yet to say positively what had caused the fatal explosion, but each expressed his suspicion that it was the work of a secret enemy. And the Consul-General added that certain facts in his possession pointed to instigation from Washington.

The four men listened breathlessly as the President read that message aloud, and for a moment or two after he finished, there was absolute silence in the room. Then from each there came an expiration like a deep sigh,—the expression of their realization of all that it meant to have that suspicion verified. And from Secretary Crane there came the only word that was spoken, and that in a voice hardly above a whisper—"It is war!"

It was the President who broke the spell. "I think, gentlemen," he said, at length, "that we had

better all take some time to think this matter over. Perhaps this evening I will send for you again."

He rose and stepped toward his office, as the others left by the outer door. In the office door the President paused, and looking beyond the waiting Senators and others, nodded significantly to the little group of newspaper men standing beyond the desk of the private secretary. At once they came forward and ranged themselves in front of the President. He lifted his head, and they marked the sadness in his face, as he said:

"Gentlemen, there is no information yet that I am able to give you. I have only one thing to say. I ask the people of the United States to suspend judgment."

Lieutenant-Commander Blake left the White House with his mind in a whirl, and walked swiftly back to the Navy Department, while Admiral Crunfield and the two Secretaries followed slowly, in close conversation. As he crossed Executive Avenue, and passed up the stone steps of the Department building, Blake was aware of a man coming swiftly down. Almost in the middle they met. It was Ybarra! For an instant each paused, and there was a flash in the eyes that told of the feeling pent up in each breast. Then, with a coldly formal salute, they passed on.

That afternoon Blake was informed that the Admiral in command of the Key West station had been directed to appoint a formal board of inquiry which was to go to Havana and make an official investiga-

tion of the loss of the battleship. But he was not in the least surprised, a little later, to be summoned by Admiral Crunfield and told to hold himself in readiness to go also to Havana, in a few days, upon one of those peculiarly significant errands whose importance is cloaked in the official navy orders under the vague but broad authority of a "confidential mission."

CHAPTER XVI

“ SOMETHING THAT WOULD STOP HIM FOR
GOOD AND ALL ”

VISCOUNT YBARRA was pacing up and down his room at the Spanish embassy, his eyes studying intently the patterns of the rug, his hands deeply buried in his trousers pockets, while Diego remained in a respectful attitude near the door. Ybarra's face showed no excitement, but the old majordomo, perfectly conversant with every mood of his young master, had no difficulty in discerning the symptoms of deep-seated mental perturbation in his nervous movements. He watched him with almost tender concern.

Suddenly the Viscount interrupted his walk, stopping a few paces from Diego, and said, in a quiet, determined tone, as though he were continuing a previous conversation:

“ Yes, it must be done that way. That is the solution, the easiest, in fact, the only way.”

Diego looked inquiringly at the master, but preserved silence.

Ybarra now turned directly to him: “ I mentioned Commander Blake to you the other night, Diego.”

“ I remember, Don Genoso, and I had him followed as you commanded. But nothing unusual has been learned. His habits seem to be very regular. The only places he has visited are the Army

and Navy Club and the houses of some friends or acquaintances, well known society people."

"Houses of friends,—what friends?"

"That of Mr. Butworth and——"

Ybarra did not let him finish. "Nothing unusual, indeed? Visiting the house of Banker Butworth? Nothing important in that?" demanded the Viscount, sharply. "You are a precious fool, Diego."

"I did not know——"

"You are aware that Butworth is deeply involved in Cuban intrigues, and you mean to say that there is no importance in Commander Blake's visit to his house?"

"But Mr. Butworth is in New York! He was away when the Commander called, so I concluded Mr. Blake was only visiting the ladies."

"Only the ladies?" Ybarra glared wickedly at the old servant. He looked like a tiger cat preparing to spring, and broke into such a torrent of fierce oaths that old Diego involuntarily retreated a step as if to escape the violence of his master's imprecations.

But the storm passed as swiftly as it had burst forth. The expression of blank amazement and deep sorrow on the faithful servant's face recalled Ybarra to himself.

"Ah, it is nothing, Diego. I meant nothing,—it was not meant for you." His voice had regained its customary pliability. "But the fact is, matters have come to a critical stage; we must act promptly

and with precision." Ybarra stepped up to the old majordomo and laid a hand on his shoulder, looking straight into his eyes. "This man Blake has received very important orders from the Navy Department. He will go to Havana in a few days. His orders concern the 'Maine' affair. What their nature is I do not know, yet it is not hard to guess. His presence in Havana would be very undesirable."

"But if he goes by order of his superiors, Don Genoso, how could General Blanco stop him?"

"The Governor-General will find himself in a very delicate position. He would not dare to prevent Blake from carrying out his instructions, certainly not. Still, if a way could be found to relieve General Blanco of the embarrassment——"

"I do not understand," said the old man, puzzled.

"Why, Diego, you are usually more sharp-witted. Suppose, for instance, Commander Blake did not reach Havana at all? People sometimes start on a journey but fail to reach their destination."

"Fail to reach their destination," repeated Diego, mechanically.

"That is exactly what I said," emphasized Ybarra, impatiently. "Things occur which naturally interfere with their travel. Something of that kind might happen to this American officer, don't you see?"

"Perhaps a telegram recalling him to Washington?" asked Diego, brightening up.

"Stupid! *Stupid!*" Ybarra stamped his foot on the rug, "even if it were cleverly forged a false

telegram would not delay his journey more than forty-eight hours. Think of a more serious obstacle,—something—that would stop him for good and all."

The Viscount walked to the table and lighted a cigarette. Diego followed his movements with dilated eyes, breathing audibly. A moment of murky silence ensued. The very atmosphere seemed heavy with the sultriness of ominous forebodings.

Then came slowly from Diego's lips: "You mean, Don Genoso, if—if he should die?" The old man's voice faltered as he uttered the words.

Ybarra turned like a flash. "That would be a very fortunate dispensation of Providence," he whispered, with a meaning look.

The old majordomo trembled. He advanced a step toward the Viscount, with blanched face and horror in his staring eyes. "Don Genoso,—then you—you want me—to do—murder?"

Ybarra laughed nervously. "Foolish old Diego, who talks of murder? A beastly word! I do not want you to murder anybody. But all sorts of things may happen here or there; a brawl in a dark nook, where the swiftest thrust of the *anchillo* decides who is the better man. Or an accident! Yes, to be sure, an accident! Some unforeseen catastrophe! Often people perish in railroad collisions, do they not? The negligence of a careless employee, a misplaced switch, a spreading rail, what do I know? A thousand things may happen by which a man's life is endangered when he travels. Such an accident would conveniently rid us of a troublesome

enemy, Diego, if, well, if Providence were on our side."

The old man did not respond. He stood like one transfixed, oblivious to his surroundings, a faraway look in his eyes. His lips moved, they seemed to form words, but uttered no sound.

"Complete dotage," snarled Ybarra through his teeth. "Perfectly idiotic!" He threw himself disgustedly into a chair, crossed his legs, crushed the half-smoked cigarette in the ash receiver, and reached nervously over the table for a fresh one. But he did not strike the match to light it. The fixed and lusterless eyes of the old servant, staring in his direction, irritated him. The silence was oppressive; a wave of nervous unrest threatened to upset his self-possession. Thoughts revolved through his mind in rapid succession.

Should he allow himself to be balked by the obstinacy of a tottering old dolt? Not he! If this tool proved useless, why, he must look for another. Another? Yes, easily said, but how and where? No, no, he needed this man. The plan must miscarry unless this always discreet, loyal old servant could be entrusted with its execution. He must humor him, coddle him, coax him, anything to win him over——

The Viscount was about to speak when old Diego, in a dazed fashion, slowly lifted a trembling hand, and feeble sounds rose in a tremor from his lips:

"Did I not guard him faithfully since the days when he, oh such a tiny little tot, clambered around

my knees? It was 'Here Diego,' and 'There Diego'—'Diego' all the time. And how Her Grace, his sainted mother, smiled benevolently from her invalid chair when the little fellow frolicked on the lawns in front of the castle! How often would she call me, lay her hand on my arm, and with tears in her beautiful eyes repeat to me: 'Diego, I may have to leave him soon. Be faithful to him, guard him as the apple of your eye. A mother's love he will never know. But watch over him with a mother's tender care when I am gone. He springs from a wild and truculent race, Diego. His father will never trouble himself about my darling. Watch over him as your most precious treasure, and I will bless you from above.' I vowed that I would never be forgetful of my charge, I vowed it to the Holy Virgin, at the death-bed, when the sainted lady passed away to abide with the glorious hosts beyond. Have I not been true to my vows?" The old man broke into a sob and buried his face in his hands.

Ybarra frowned and bit his lips. Then a contemptuous smile crept over his mouth.

"Diego," he called, softly; "Diego, I have never doubted your faithful love for me. Always were you the good, loyal, trusty Diego, more a friend to me than a servant."

The wooing of the serpent, luring a harrowed, sorely struggling soul to ruin and perdition.

Ybarra rose with catlike suppleness and touched Diego lightly on the arm. The old man gave a sudden start. Claspings his head with both hands as

though he wanted to make sure that he was awake, he looked bewilderedly at his master. But he made no resistance when the Viscount led him to a chair near his own, and pressed him gently down into the cushions.

"Diego, you remember the time when we went hunting in the Pyrenees, the night we encountered the big gray wolf? Dusk was settling on the ragged mountainside, and we were far from the hunting lodge, scrambling, tired and half-starved over the rough hills, when suddenly——"

"Yes, yes, I remember, Don Genoso," interrupted the old man, eagerly, his eyes lighting up with youthful fire. "I remember. You were just astride the trunk of a huge fallen tree, perhaps a dozen yards ahead of me, when a fierce howl pierced the air, and through the crashing underbrush leaped the terrible beast, with gleaming eyes and hanging tongue, straight upon you. You had just time to draw your *puñar* and strike, but the force of his leap threw you down, and both you and the beast rolled on the ground together——"

"Then you, brave Diego, like a guardian saint, came to my rescue, threw yourself on the panting beast and buried your knife in its throat. The fall had stunned me. The last I recollect was the spurt of the wolf's blood over my face. Then I lost consciousness. You, Diego, had saved my life!"

"I killed him, yes, I killed him, the saintly Virgin be praised!" exclaimed the old man, with a triumphant ring in his voice, "my arm was strong, my

hand sure, my aim deadly,—I killed him and saved your precious life! ”

“ Diego,” whispered Ybarra, intensely, tightly gripping the old man’s arm, “ you slew the wolf, would you fail to strike at the enemy who now seeks my destruction? ”

“ Your enemy? This American officer! He seeks your life? ” A wavering light flickered in the old man’s eyes.

“ He is the deadliest enemy, Diego, and his fight is not in the open. For that he had a chance in Venice, but escaped opportunely. Now he threatens to crush my life’s ambition,—more—he will destroy my happiness, unless——” laying his hand again on Diego’s arm, he whispered: “ Diego, he stands between me and my love! He reaches out for the prize that must be mine! He hounds me, he—he ”—breaking into a paroxysm of uncontrollable violence—“ may the wrath of hell take him!—he must die! ”—Ybarra’s breath came heavily,—“ and if he dies by my own hand——”

“ Don Genoso! ” Old Diego shrank back from the wild outburst of passionate hatred reflecting its ugly shadow in the distorted features of his master.

Ybarra’s voice lowered again to a hoarse whisper: “ Diego, would you rather see my own hands stained with his blood than speak the word which will procure a willing tool? ” he urged, with sneaking cajolery.

Old Diego, inwardly wrought with ineffable trepidation, stared at his young master in helpless,

miserable silence, trembling hands folded in his lap. He fought an awful struggle with himself. Even his not over delicate conscience revolted against cold-blooded murder. Yet that deep concern for the man to whom his whole life had been devoted, on whom his every thought centered to the exclusion of all else! Again the sorrowful apparition of the saintly lady, the master's mother, seemed to hover about his mind's vision,—the sad, imploring eye,—a voice that seemed to whisper: "Diego, Diego, save my son from this awful crime, keep his hands clean——!"

His drawn features relaxed. A look of indescribable softness came into his eyes. "Your happiness, Don Genoso?" he murmured, with a glance of tender compassion at his young master, "your life's happiness depends on his death?"

"Diego, there is not room for both of us.—If he lives—and wins—I am lost!"

Slowly the old servant arose from his chair, a strange expression in his features. "Your life, your happiness is precious," he said, solemn sadness in his voice, and still quavering with subdued emotion. "My life is nothing,—my soul I commend to the mercy of the Holy Virgin——"

"Diego!" Ybarra's breath halted with suppressed excitement, "you will help me?" A gleam of fierce joy flamed up in his eyes. "You will?"

The old man stood rigid, his head slightly drooping. "Don Genoso, I am your servant," he said, simply.

"*Good* old Diego!" Ybarra whispered, effusively,

an arm around the old man's shoulder, "I knew you would not fail me!" Then, adding hastily, "But I do not ask you to soil your own hands,—hire a rogue who will accurately carry out your orders. You have clever knaves in your service, are there none daring enough to face a little danger?"

"Yes, Don Genoso, I will think it over."

"You pay the fellows well for spying. Give them more, don't be niggardly. No price is too high! You will find some ready enough to do anything. If the plans are shrewdly devised they need run but little risk of being detected."

"I believe I can pick out two or three whom I can safely trust."

"But quickly, Diego, quickly! We must lose no time. He may receive his travel orders suddenly and start sooner than we think."

"I shall attend to it to-day, and I shall have his residence watched in the meantime, so that I may be aware of his movements."

He was about to leave the room when the Viscount called. The old man turned with an inquiring look.

"By the way, Diego, I need some money. Make a draft for a thousand dollars on the New York bankers."

The majordomo screwed up his eyebrows. "That will nearly exhaust the account, Don Genoso."

"Exhaust it, the devil!" Ybarra frowned.

"Yes, Don Genoso, the expenses have mounted up lately,"—he coughed respectfully,—"some large

jewelers' bills and—your establishment in Baltimore has been very expensive——”

“Ha,—yes, yes,”—the short laugh came somewhat forced,—“you are going to lecture me, good Diego. Never mind,” with a wave of the hand, as the old majordomo was preparing to remonstrate submissively,—“never mind, I meant to speak to you about the matter. I have made up my mind to marry Miss Lane. I suppose that poor little fool over there,”—a derisive jerk of the head—“imagined she would be Mrs. Juan Alvarez. Ha,—a delightful notion, to be sure.” Then, glancing sharply at Diego: “I must not be annoyed when I am engaged to Miss Lane. I leave it to you, Diego, to arrange that affair. Pay any reasonable sum. If my personal account is exhausted, draw on the secret fund. We can use that temporarily and replace the money when the rents come.”

“Your will shall be served, Don Genoso,” said the old man, and made ready to go.

“Don’t look troubled, Diego,” the Viscount laughed, frivolously, “if I succeed there will be no question of a few thousand at a pinch. That old bald-headed banker has plenty of millions and no use for them at all. His niece will be comfortably provided for.”

CHAPTER XVII

HIS EXCELLENCY'S SIGNATURE

FOR a while Ybarra walked up and down, puffing away rapidly. Then he flung the half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace and sat down at his writing table.

"Things are shaping very satisfactorily all around, hahaha! very satisfactorily! But,"—glancing at his watch—"I must get that letter ready. Blanco should be kept informed of the situation and spurred to activity, and,"—with a graceful little sweep of the hand toward unknown regions, where imagination might locate the dignified, longitudinal form of Don Pio de Camponero,—“in order to make quite sure of *you*, my precious old fossil, we will let you sign a proposition that may to some extent circumscribe your altogether too fruitful financial activities."

Taking some paper from the drawer he began to scribble rapidly, with a pause here and there for a moment's cogitation, filling several pages in quick order. Then he perused the manuscript carefully, reached for a couple of sheets bearing the official imprint of the embassy, and copied the draft laboriously in the time-honored, large-lettered stiff script of the chancelleries, a task which in this particular case he would not entrust to a clerk.

He finished and rang the bell. "Is the Amba-

sador in his room?" he asked the servant who responded.

Receiving an affirmative reply, he immediately proceeded to Don Pio's study.

Knees crossed, the indispensable long black cigar between his lips, monocle languidly focused on the headlines of the morning paper, His Excellency rested very comfortably on the divan in the bay window of his study, when Viscount Ybarra entered. A careless "good-morning" with a disdainful wrinkling of the ambassadorial nose was the reply to the formal greeting of his subordinate. Don Pio divined without much mental exercise that the secretary's entrance meant a derangement of his luxurious ease,—the dreadful necessity of attending to something or other; and he had a constitutional aversion to concentrating his attention upon anything at any time unless it promised some individual advantage to his own all important person. "Office chores," as he termed the routine business of the embassy, were the proper thing for subordinates; why should they molest him with such matters? Perfectly incomprehensible! His looks indicated as much, when the Viscount, without taking the slightest heed of his superior's chronic indisposition to devote himself to anything but his own comfort, approached the bay window.

"Your Excellency, I desire to submit for your signature a letter which I have drafted." Ybarra's tone was courteous, cold, very formal. "The letter should be dispatched immediately."

"Letter? Hm," growled the Ambassador. "What is it about? Must I be troubled with it?"

"Unavoidable, Your Excellency. It briefly informs General Blanco of the progress made in the European negotiations, contains instructions as to the attitude to be maintained by him——"

"Instructions? To Blanco? That is preposterous, Vizconde!"

"—and requires your signature," concluded the Viscount, entirely unconcerned by the ambassadorial interruption.

"Let me see this letter," said the Ambassador, gruffly. His Excellency's temper was ruffled immediately. This fellow Ybarra rasped on his nerves every single time he came; he had always some unpleasant proposition *in petto*, some disagreeable task; and evidently delighted in presenting such distasteful matters to him. Now again! "Instructions to Blanco." What an abominable presumption, to send instructions to a man in Blanco's position, who must be handled with the greatest delicacy.

Don Pio started to read the letter; the first lines in silence, then unconsciously repeating the words aloud:

"—however, the situation continues unchanged. Everything depends on the momentary political and military success in Havana, if the plans for the maintenance of Spanish integrity, now under secret discussion by the European Chancelleries, are to mature. Favorable advices have been received from Vienna, Paris, and Rome, and the prospects for an

anti-American defensive and offensive alliance seem excellent. Berlin is still wavering, but we are making excellent progress in London, with the valuable assistance of His Apostolic Majesty.' ”

The Ambassador nodded a passing approval and continued reading:

“ ‘ I do not believe you pay enough attention to the rôle of England. To my mind her object is that the Americans occupy themselves with us and leave her in peace, and if there is war, so much the better. That would further remove what would threaten her——’

“ Vizconde,” said the Ambassador to Ybarra, “ I do not appreciate the tone in which this letter is written,—the language is presumptuous—a man like Blanco must resent that. The tone should be modified.” Then reading again:

“ ‘ You will be able to assist in modifying this attitude by a more careful surveillance of the press reports than heretofore. Nearly all the newspaper *canaille* which swarms in the hotels at Havana are English, and they fill the newspapers and reviews of London with biased statements. It is absolutely essential that reports of a favorable character should go abroad from Havana, to England as well as to the United States, for the President’s messages to Congress are very largely influenced by newspaper sentiments. Besides the natural and inevitable coarseness with which he dwells on all that the press of Spain has said of Weyler’s administration, it shows once more what the President is, weak and catering

to the rabble, a low politician who desires to stand well with the jingoes of his party.'

"Hm,—hm, true enough, but——" and Don Pio continued his perusal:

" ' But most important of all, you must without delay agitate the question of commercial relations, even though it be only for effect, and send a confidential man here, empowered to make remunerative private and personal concessions, whom I can use to make propaganda among the Senators and others who can be reached——'

" Indeed, *no!* " A purple color mounted to the Ambassador's face. That capped the climax! Now he saw it all in a flash. The whole letter was nothing but a blind to cover the nefarious purposes of this rascal of a secretary. A confidential person he wants whom he himself can manipulate to wrest away the lucrative management of the concession business from the ambassadorial hands and reap the harvest into his own pockets. The impudent scoundrel!

" Indeed, *no!* " repeated Don Pio, " certainly *not!* We are not in a position to dictate to the Governor-General of Cuba. The letter cannot be sent in this form. It is well enough to inform Blanco of the state of affairs here and abroad, but we cannot prescribe a course of action. He knows himself what to do."

" Your Excellency, time is pressing," observed Ybarra, nonchalantly, and calmly surveying the excited features of his superior, " the letter must be handed to the courier at once, as the train leaves

within an hour, and to rewrite would cause unwarrantable delay." His eyes were steadfastly fixed upon the Ambassador's face; there was a silent menace in his look. "I have carefully considered the wording. The Cuban administration must be shaken up from their indolence, and this letter will do it. Your Excellency's signature, *if you please!*"

Don Pio glared at his secretary with eyes that would wither him. But he winced when he saw that cold, firm, marble expression in Ybarra's face. The recollection of the previous contest with that unscrupulous rascal—not so very long ago, either—was still too vivid; he felt helpless, as wax in the Viscount's hands. Boiling inwardly with suppressed rage he rose, letter in hand, and walked over to the writing table.

"*Picarote!*" he snarled. Then he seized a pen and scrawled his signature.

"Here," he grunted, tossing the paper on the table, and returned to his seat in the bay window.

With a mocking smile Ybarra picked up the letter: "I thank Your Excellency." A polite bow, and he walked unconcernedly from the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

UNDESIRABLE CITIZENS

LATE that night Diego entered the front yard of a squalid little frame house in the southwestern section of the city, chiefly the abiding place of negroes and Italian laborers. Reaching the door he gave a peculiar double knock. There was a shuffle inside, and then the door opened a bit, a tously young head peering into the darkness without. A nod of recognition and the door opened wide enough to admit the old man, who stepped briskly into the dingy room, faintly lighted by a small kerosene lamp.

"Why is it that I did not find you here when I came on Tuesday, Rufino?" he asked, sharply. "I had ordered you to stay here in the house and await me?"

"A thousand pardons, Señor Diego," the young fellow answered meekly. "I felt lonesome and walked a little, and then"—his head lowered in confusion so that a thick swab of hair almost hid his eyes,—“they caught me—and I feared they would put me in prison—or kill me,” he whispered.

The old man gave an exclamation of angry alarm.

"Caught you? Who? The secret service?"

The young fellow bent his head again. "They had me before the judge of inquisition, they threat-

ened me," he shuddered, "but they let me go,—they found nothing."

He glanced furtively at the old man, as if afraid that further cross-questioning might trap him in his lie, but Diego was too much occupied with his own thoughts to observe him closely.

"Careless scamp! I have warned you often," the old man said, grimly. "Tell me now what happened."

And Rufino told slickly of his experience in the sweat-box at the Treasury with many boastful allusions to his imaginary martyrdom, but carefully avoiding any reference to his breakdown and cowardly confession.

"Not so loud," admonished Diego several times, "you cannot tell, there may be someone listening. We must be careful," and Rufino moderated his voice to a low murmur.

For a while after Rufino had ended his narrative, Diego sat in silence, ruminating deeply. Then tracing his thoughts out half-loud he mumbled: "He is the shrewdest of them. I must use him. He will be faithful."

Turning to the boy who had watched him with cat-like intensity: "Rufino, you are shrewd and loyal. I trust you. I have a task for you to fulfill. It is grave and full of danger, but you will do it well and your reward will be great. Come here and listen."

The old man drew his chair toward the lamp which rested on a rickety washstand in the corner,

and took a small package from his pocket, spreading a map and a railroad timetable before him. For a long while he talked to the young fellow in whispers, now and then illustrating his words with the finger on the map or by a reference to the timetable, Rufino listening with rapt attention, eyes afire, nodding vivid assent at intervals.

Finally Diego rose: "You will be faithful, Rufino?" he asked, with threatening solemnity. "Swear it by the Holy Virgin."

"I swear it," answered Rufino, in breathless whisper, a fierce, exultant light glowing under the swab of uncouth black hair.

"It is well," said the old man. He handed the boy a handful of banknotes, and extracted a letter from the package before him. "Here is money for your expenses, and this is the letter. Guard it with the last breath of your life until you have delivered it. And you mind," a dark frown settled on his sharp-set face,—"*he* must not return!"

Rufino nodded with an ugly grin: "I shall have care."

A moment later Diego squeezed through the door into the foggy night and was gone.

CHAPTER XIX

CONSUELO'S SLIPPER

MIDMORNING of the day after Ybarra's various arrangements with old Diego saw a little party of five cantering along the road toward Rock Creek Park. The weather had cleared finely after the storm of the early week, and the fresh bracing air left its ruddy mark on the cheeks of the riders.

"I love nothing better than a ride on a glorious morning like this," cried Roberta Wyndham, gayly. Her eyes sparkled with the pleasure of wholesome enjoyment, as she blithely whipped a little cluster of dried leaves overhanging the riding path.

"Iss it not?" confirmed Prince Kropatchek, enthusiastically. "Vhat a vonderful idea this iss of you, Miss Wyndham, to ride vhen *tout le monde* iss just coming to breakfast. It makes one feel so immensely hilarious."

"Woke you up, did it, Prince?" said Percy Wyndham, banteringly. "Must be quite an exertion, to chase yourself out of bed at the ungodly hour of 10 A. M."

"Diplomats never sleep really, do they, Prince?" asked Roberta. "They have to watch everything so closely, and nothing escapes their vigilance?"

"They slumber sometimes," replied the Prince, entering into the spirit of banter, "but, like the hare,

always with one open eye. And they always observe their *confrères* very minutely," winking an eye at Viscount Ybarra, who kept his horse very close to Miss Lane.

"Look here, Prince, just stop a minute," cried Percy, "your saddle girth is slipping. I'll fix it. Say, Viscount," he called over to Ybarra, "you trot ahead with the ladies, and we will catch up with you in three shakes of a lamb's tail."

Percy jumped off and the Prince dismounted also, while Viscount Ybarra, nodding carelessly to the former, rode on at a lively pace, flanked on either side by a charming young lady.

"It's all right now," said Percy after a while, ready to remount, "but you better change your groom, Prince. Some day you might have an accident if he saddles your mount that carelessly."

Kropatchek hardly listened to the admonitions of his companion; he stood motionless, holding the reins of the two horses, while his eyes followed the little group, now a few hundred yards ahead of them. Suddenly recollecting himself, however, he turned to Percy and thanked him for his kind service.

"I was observing the horses of the ladies," he said, apologetically; "not the right horse for Miss Wyndham. He is too much prancing,—a *caracoleur*,—your sister must ride a more softly comported horse, is it not?"

"Oh, but she is fond of a spirited mount, she likes everything lively, a hummer she is, that sister of mine."

"You say *what?*" exclaimed the Prince, looking up sharply, his sense of propriety visibly shocked, "a—*homard*—you call her? No, you vill not call Miss Wyndham a such?"

"What's the matter? Why not?" asked Percy, innocently surprised. "Isn't she, though? You don't seem to like that term of endearment?"

"Endearment?—But a *homard*, so ve call, iss vhat you eat vith mayonnaise. That is an endearment for the palate, but not for a young lady, *parbleu!* I have such a reverential estimation for Miss Wyndham," he added, reproachfully.

Percy burst out laughing. "Lobster, hey? Did you think I called Bertie a lobster? No, indeed,—a hummer, don't you understand what that is?—same as a humming bird."

"Ah"—the Prince's countenance beamed—"a *Colibri*, you mean? Not so bad, Hahaha! Not so bad! Miss Wyndham a *Colibri!* But no, it iss not an adequacy of the description. Vhat I would design Miss Wyndham iss a Bird of Paradise,—a be-autiful Bird of Paradise!" And waving his right arm, he described an intricate curve in the air, probably intended as an imitation of the graceful outlines of that ornithological wonder.

"Gee whiz! Prince, you are pretty rapid; seems to me your imagination must be working overtime. But in the name of dear Bertie I humbly acknowledge your flattering compliment." This with droll *grandezza*.

"It iss not a flattery, I express the abundance

of my convictions," assured Prince Kropatchek, seriously.

Percy squinted at him quizzically. "I truly believe you scintillating diplomats must be brought up on a diet of flowery language from your earliest youth, and when you enter the service you are so crowded with it that you have to hand it out broadcast as you go along."

"But Mistar Wyndham," protested the Prince, "I——"

"Blow the 'Mister Wyndham.' Why don't you call me just plain Percy as the rest of them do? Sounds more congenial. I'm not an ancient duffer with a backache and flowing sidewhiskers."

The Prince drawing in the reins, held out his hand.

"I wish ve become good friends," he said, earnestly, "and if you make me blow the 'Mistar Wyndham,' you must blow the 'scintillating diplomat,' vill you?" accompanying the request with a sly wink.

Percy spurred his horse, came up with a sidelong jump to Kropatchek, and grasped the outstretched hand with a will. "I believe I can. Honest Injun, I really think, Prince, you are much too sincere and outspoken for a diplomat; but that's just my long suit, and you and I will make a bully team."

"The new international alliance on the basis of reciprocal good sentiments between the High Contracting Parties, and the extinction of the common enemy?" smiled the Prince, insinuatingly.

"Oho! Do you want to go on the warpath right away? Where is the bloody enemy?"

Kropatchek cast a significant look ahead, where Ybarra and the two ladies were just then doubling a clump of trees at a turn in the road. Then glancing at his companion: "I think,—I should vish for an ally in earnest." There was a sincere ring in his voice.

"Is this a treaty for defense and protection only, or perhaps for the acquisition of new possessions?" inquired Percy, cunningly.

The Prince straightened up.

"Ah, I can defend myself, and I can attack alone, but"—he lowered his voice to a confidential whisper,—“it needs for me the vedette, to reconnoiter the *terrain* before the encounter.”

"That's it, hey?" laughed Percy. "Here's your ally, Prince. I'll do the scouting for you. I'm just spoiling for a brush with—with the enemy."

Prince Kropatchek rode on silently for a few moments. "You do not like him any better than I myself do?"

Percy's face darkened. "I would not trust him across the road. Have you ever known persons with the evil eye? I think he must be one of the lot. Somehow it gives me the cold creeps, when he talks to me. But honest, it is wonderful, how the girls take to him. Seems to me, he does the snake act to them."

"A snake? Hahaha, a poisonous serpent? Hahaha!" crackled the Prince. "You have not a very delectable opinion of the Viscount?"

"Certainly not. I think he is about the slimiest

fellow I have ever met. You have noticed he has never a kind word to say for anybody, nothing but mean, derogatory comments; a stab in the back for anybody who is not present, but oozing with suavity, when he is face to face with you."

"*Tripoteur dégoûtant!*" murmured Kropatchek, contemptuously. "He is an intrigant, a malevolious scandal-cook."

"He is all of that," confirmed Percy, with a grin, "darned if you didn't hit the bull's-eye exactly."

"You have an intimate acquaintance with Ybarra? He calls frequently at your house, does he not so?"

"He's been there too often to suit *me*, I can tell you, though I've profited a good deal, talking Spanish with him."

"Perhaps he takes much interest in Miss Wyndham?" inquired the Prince, cautiously, blinking through his eye-glasses, "and she may care for his society?"

"Well, you know, all the girls like a little spicy gossip. He works that game to perfection, and he flirts with every good-looking girl in our set, but let him look out, if he monkeys too much around my sister."

"Possibly a cautious hint in the psychological moment?" suggested the Prince. "It might work the disillusion?"

"The trouble is you can't tell them anything. It just makes them more obstinate. You see, Bertie and I are the best comrades in the world. I am two years her senior, and we have been playmates from

wayback. She is the best fellow you can imagine, even if she is a girl. But she mostly has her own way. You don't want to cross her, or she flares up like a torch. But I'll keep my eye on *him* all right. Good-by to him, if he comes too close to Bertie. And I won't be afraid of international complications, either, when it comes to that," laughed Percy, heartily.

"*A merveille*," said the Prince, well satisfied with the result of his reconnaissance, "you are a very clever *observateur*. But should we not ride a little faster and escort the ladies?"

"I guess you're right. Strikes me I have been shamefully neglecting my sacred duties as chaperone for the girls. We must not abandon them too long to the tender mercies of His Snakeship."

"*En avant*," cried the Prince, spurring his horse, and a short gallop brought them up with the rest of the party.

Viscount Ybarra appeared to be truly in his most congenial element, engrossed as he was in the pleasurable task of regaling the two young ladies with a copious flow of society gossip and piquantries of the latest pattern. He had just embarked on a description of events at a recent rehearsal of one of the season's charity entertainments which are regularly promoted by the fashionable set, presumably as the most agreeable mode of atonement for its more frivolous gayeties.

"*Madame La Marquise* was exultant over her victory in the arrangement of the first Tableau," he

was saying, "for she had established undisputed supremacy in the rôle of Queen-of-the-Night, while Mademoiselle Consuelo had been assigned to the inferior position of a simple angel——"

"How appropriate for dear Consuelo," murmured Roberta.

"Madame expected, of course," continued the Viscount, "that her triumph would revive the allegiance of the wavering knight of the broad shoulders and the healthy complexion,—Hillsbury, you know,—who had been her faithful Seladon for two seasons, yet lately had shown reprehensible symptoms of truancy. But she reckoned without the dear little angel who evened up matters very soon, and I dare say, with unquestionable success."

"Her sweet, angelic temperament must have been pitifully tried," suggested Roberta, with a little laugh.

"It rose to the highest pitch," replied the Viscount, chuckling maliciously, "and that is no mere phrase in this case. Next on the programme was a Ballet in which the two ladies were to perform a *pas de deux*. Our little angel danced most divinely and finished with a really creditable high kick. The healthy knight, towering behind *Madame La Marquise* in a magnificent pose, as prescribed in the Scenario, held a tambourine high aloft,—he was a Satyr or something. Perhaps it was an accident, but Consuelo's slipper came off when she performed the high kick, and flew directly over Madame's head against the tambourine, as if she had aimed for it. Madame, who at that moment was gracefully pirou-

etting, saw the slipper coming, dodged, lost her balance and slid backward, settling down with a bang on the bass drum, carelessly left there by a musician,—a picture of despair. While everybody was tittering, the gallant knight, without paying the slightest attention to the distress of Madame, picked up the slipper, touched the trophy reverently to his lips, and delivered it with a profound bow to our little angel. Imagine the effect," laughed Ybarra.

"The poor Marquise! I think Mr. Hillsbury acted very indelicately," said Miss Lane, severely. "And didn't anybody,—didn't you come to her assistance at once?"

"Before I had a chance to reach her she had risen, pale and haughty, and swept icily off the stage"—Ybarra shrugged his shoulders. "When she was gone," he added, with another chuckle, "the little angel remarked sweetly, she had never known Madame to be so musically inclined as she seemed to be this evening."

Miss Lane turned her head aside, without deigning him worthy of a look or a word. Noticing the approach of Prince Kropatchek and Percy Wyndham, she called out with marked impatience: "Where have you been all this time? Our cavaliers are strangely indifferent to their ladies' company."

Roberta seemed no less provoked than Helen, but evidently for other reasons.

"You seem to be quite captivated by that mischievous little creature Consuelo, Viscount?"

"Pardon me, not mischievous. Just the innocent

pleasantry of an attractive girl, bent upon disconcerting a social rival, who would not spare her, if she had her chance.—We should not be uncharitable, Miss Wyndham.”

“She is shockingly audacious, and I cannot admire your charitable inclinations any more than your taste.”

“Everything tastes good in its season,” returned the Viscount, flippantly.

“Apparently you are partial to many ‘good things’ in as many seasons.”

“Who would despise them, Miss Wyndham? A *connaissanceur* certainly not,” was the cynical reply.

“That is frank at least!”

A treacherous crimson swept over Roberta’s features. She bent down on the horse’s neck, smoothing out the mane, to hide her resentment of Ybarra’s ungracious demeanor. His words had hurt her to the quick, like the sting of a wasp.

CHAPTER XX

THE EXCELLENT HUMOR OF A VISCOUNT

ON the veranda of the clubhouse, which afforded an excellent view over the rolling country, two figures watched the approach of the little cavalcade. Lady Sarah Edgethorne scrutinized the riders intently through her lorgnette, while the Honorable Trumbull Edgethorne, her devoted consort, was seated near her in a comfortable armchair, legs crossed, arms folded, smoking an enormous cigar, and ready to offer unqualified consent to any and all of her observations.

Sometimes, it is true, a vague impression that it resembled uncommonly hard, mental work, to keep pace with the rapid succession of subjects conjured up by My Lady's versatile mind, would trouble the Honorable Trumbull's composure, but his discreet and unswerving devotion overcame such difficulties with most gallant effort, though he rarely overtaxed his conversational gifts.

"Peculiar arrangement," commented Lady Sarah, who had left her rattan rocker to gain a better place of vantage near the balustrade. "Very singular! Helen and Percy considerably in the lead. That saucy Roberta Wyndham with the dear Prince close to her side,—and Ybarra trotting along with a face like a thundercloud. Quite funereal, altogether.

Helen looks as if she had been rubbed the wrong way, too. What can it mean, I wonder?"

"Ma-arvelous," remarked the Honorable Trumbull, stroking his drooping sandy mustache, "your power of penetration is a-mazingly keen, my dear. Ma-arvelous!"

"Please don't attempt sarcasm, Trummy. You have never been successful in that line, and the exertion might prove too much for you," said Lady Sarah, pertly. "Besides, you know, I *do* not appreciate it."

"Beg pardon, my dear," remonstrated the Honorable Trumbull, feebly, "I had no idea of being sarcastic. Purest admiration, in fact."

The stamping of hoofs and chinking of bits, a fluttering of riding habits, a scraping of feet on the frosted gravel, and the party had alighted.

Helen Lane was the first to ascend the steps of the veranda. She hurried to embrace Lady Edgethorne.

"Oh, Lady Sarah, what a relief to see you. Thank heavens, *that* ride is over."

"You are agitated, Helen. I rather expected something mysterious when I saw you ride up here in this peculiar order of march."

"I am exasperated. It was almost insupportable. I anticipated something of the kind, since *he* was to be of the party, but not what it was,—not that."

"He?" asked Lady Edgethorne, slyly, "there seem to be three 'He's' in your party, if my arithmetic is reliable?"

"For goodness' sake, don't tease me,—you know well enough. He was simply odious. He actually persecuted me, though I gave him clearly enough to understand, without being downright rude, that he was not welcome. He must have comprehended it, yet he clung to me like a bur, until as a last resort I challenged Percy to a race, and we brushed ahead. When we were out of hearing I asked Percy to remain at my side for the rest of the ride."

"My dear Helen, ours is a perplexing fate. The men we least care for overwhelm us with their tedious admiration, and others—How do you do, Miss Wyndham? You look awfully sweet.—Prince Kropatchek, I really must applaud your style of riding. There is such a charmingly devotional air about you when you are on horseback. I dare say you dote on horses?"

While Lady Sarah thus greeted the later arrivals, Helen turned to the Honorable Trumbull, who regretfully abandoned his comfortable position, to properly express his gratification at meeting her.

Prince Kropatchek, still radiating the happiness generated during the ride, bestowed a chivalrous bow on Lady Edgethorpe: "I am afraid——"

"Afraid? Not of me, I hope? And not possibly of Miss Wyndham? I observed that your horse showed an evident attachment for hers. It was actually touching, Prince.—Ah,—perhaps you were afraid that Miss Wyndham was in danger of tumbling off?"

The Prince, dimly aware that Lady Sarah was grilling both him and Miss Wyndham, darted an embarrassed glance toward Roberta, who had passed on to join Miss Lane and the Honorable Trumbull, after a polite recognition of Lady Edgethorne's greeting.

"I thought——" he took another start.

"—that you could not be observed?" My Lady fired off again before he was able to disentangle his thoughts any further. "Why, you are deplorably mistaken, dear Prince,—the whole delineation was clearly discernible, even without a telescope. One might have imagined that you were seeking shelter from a cold world at her side?—Perfectly delightful rural picture, Prince Kropatchek. I am so fond of landscapes with shepherds and shepherdesses *à la* Watteau."

"Lady Edgethorne, I believe I am quite afraid of *you—now*. Hahaha!" crackled the Prince, feeling easier when a second glance had assured him that Lady Sarah's pungent remarks could not have reached the ears of Roberta.

"And here we are," burst in Percy, leaping up the steps, two at a time. "What has become of the Viscount?"

His looks searched the veranda. Then, catching a glimpse of Ybarra in the hall of the clubhouse, posed before a mirror, circumspectly smoothing his hair, he waved his hand grotesquely and hummed with a mocking grimace:

*"I rode to the county fair,
All beasts and birds were there,
The fussy Baboon
By the light of the moon
Was combing his——"*

"Percy," warned Roberta in a frightened whisper, turning quickly around, "you——"

"—raven locks," finished Percy unconcernedly. "That doesn't rhyme, but it is truer to life in this case, than the original. Don't worry, sister dear, and don't get grumptious. I'll be real good and at your service in a minute," kissing his hand to her. "How do you do, Lady Edgethorne? *Quien sus pies beso*, as the Viscount would say in his ornamental lingo. I have the honor to kiss your feet!"

"Incorrigible as ever," Lady Sarah laughed, "but I will allow you to shake my hand instead," holding out two fingers of her left hand to him, which Percy, with an exaggerated show of punctilious courtesy, delicately squeezed between his forefinger and thumb.

"You speak Spanish, Mr. Wyndham? Another accomplishment of which I was in ignorance."

"Oh, yes, I caught on to some of it while I was mining in Mexico. Since father's death I have had to look out for that property altogether. This winter I practiced conversation with our distinguished——" nodding sidewise to the hall where Ybarra was still leisurely busy with the improvement of his personal appearance,—“to keep myself going.”

"Accept my compliments, Mr. Wyndham."

Dismissing him thus with a pleasant nod, Lady Edgethorne advanced toward the group of which Miss Lane formed the attractive center, and catching Helen's eye, gave her a clandestine wink.

"I have been lolling in these rocking-chairs for half an hour or more, and that makes one stiff," she complained, taking Helen's arm, "let us tramp up and down a few times."

When they were far enough from the others not to be overheard, Lady Sarah changed her tone.

"Helen," she said, with gentle firmness, "as things have come to such a pass, I think it would be best for you to leave Washington for a while and get out of Ybarra's reach. If you don't, he will pester you without mercy. He is not the kind to let up, even after half a dozen rebuffs. He believes himself irresistible, and as he considers you an alluring prize, will pursue you relentlessly. Men do not admit, as a rule, that girls can be strong willed enough to withstand importunities for any length of time, if they only persevere. And in your case, Ybarra is doubly assured by the support of your aunt. If I were in your place I would skip out and take Aunt Jane along to keep her from plotting mischief."

A deep sigh arose from Helen's lips. "Oh, I wish I could go somewhere,—anywhere, only to get away from these maddening surroundings. I am tired of Washington,—I *hate* it." This in a burst of almost passionate vehemence which caused Lady Sarah to wonder shrewdly.

"You have a bad case of nerves, my dear," she observed quietly, scrutinizing Helen with intent curiosity.

"Oh," cried Helen, faintly,—it sounded like a stifled sob,—"I am so wretched,—you do not know how I suffer."

"Can't you prevail on Mrs. Butworth to take you abroad for a few months?"

"Not now," answered Helen, with a despondent shake of the head. "Uncle Val is going to Havana with the 'Isona,' but Aunt Jane is so comfortable here that she won't even go there with him. She would feel lost without the constant hubbub of society life around her."

"Mr. Butworth going to Cuba? Indeed?" asked Lady Sarah, surprised. "That is interesting. Why, child, it would be the very thing for you to accompany him."

"But he goes on business. I could not go with him alone, and Aunt Jane, I tell you, would shudder at the thought of being bored to distraction with nobody but myself to keep her company."

"Could you not invite some friends?—Make it a sort of house-party afloat? That will compensate her for the loss of Washington entertainments. You could find plenty of people who would be wild to go." Lady Sarah smiled insinuatingly.

"Invite a party?" A bright light came into Helen's eyes. "Would *you* go? And Mr. Edgethorne?" she asked, with sudden vivacity. "You will? Oh, you must! That would be lovely! I

am sure I could persuade Aunt Jane to chaperone a smart little party. I think she would just love to do that—if we can corral some distinguished people,” she added, archly, and wreathed in smiles. “Stupid *me!* I never thought of that.”

Lady Sarah perceived Helen’s abrupt change of manner with quiet amusement. She had not dreamed that her commonplace suggestion, made at random, could produce such a decided effect.

“That man must be really abominable to her,” she mused, “and yet, he is not bad looking at all,—only not quite so *recherché* as a young girl’s fancy might desire.”

“I doubt whether Trummy can go, as the Ambassador will need him; but as far as I am concerned, I could probably arrange it,” she assented, amiably.

“And I will ask Roberta and Percy, perhaps a few others of the select. That would make a congenial little party?” Helen entered into the project with an interest akin to enthusiasm.

“If you invite Roberta, you will have to take pity on Prince Kropatchek, and ask him too.” Lady Sarah motioned significantly over to the other end of the veranda, where the Prince was engaged most assiduously in entertaining Miss Wyndham with a wonderful display of his quaint gallantry.

Following the direction of Lady Sarah’s glance Helen broke into a musical little laugh: “It certainly would be cruel to interrupt this budding romance. And besides he is decidedly amusing.”

“Moreover, he meets all the requirements of Mrs.

Butworth as to social distinction," added Lady Edgethorne, with just a shade of sarcasm, "and he is perfectly harmless."

"Lady Sarah, I am indeed grateful to you for this splendid suggestion. I shall talk it over with Aunt Jane at once, and have her write to you, to Roberta, and Kropatchek. But please, do not mention anything *here* about invitations, else we would have to invite that odious——"

Helen was almost betrayed into an outcry, when a slight noise behind her back made her look around and she saw Viscount Ybarra stepping through a French window which opened on the porch,—to all appearance deeply immersed in a study of his well-manicured hands, while a queer expression played around the corners of his mouth.

"Can he have listened?" whispered Helen under her breath.

"Hardly," returned Lady Edgethorne, without moving her lips, having noticed Ybarra's approach instantaneously. Now she smiled composedly at the Viscount.

"Your obedient servant, Lady Edgethorne.—Miss Lane, my humble compliments.—I interrupted an exchange of important confidences?" Ybarra's features expanded into a Mephistophelian grin. "I do not wish to disturb——?"

"You do not disturb us in the least," retorted Lady Sarah, promptly, "delighted to see you, Viscount. We discussed no secrets at all. Helen was telling me that Mr. Butworth is thinking of taking

his yacht to Havana for a brief outing and wants her to accompany him. She dreads the sea-trip, poor dear, and does not wish to go, but I have been trying to persuade her that it would be very wholesome for her, because the intense social activity has been getting dreadfully on her nerves, and the sea air is so invigorating!" All this flowed as glibly from Lady Sarah's lips as the water gurgling through a mill-race.

"Havana? Miss Lane going to Havana?" Ybarra's eyes seemed to bore into Helen's very soul. His features hardened and he paused a moment. He was not prepared for this off-hand announcement. "Indeed, an alluring prospect," he said, deliberately. "I trust your outing will be a source of unalloyed enjoyment to you, Miss Lane. You have fixed the time of your departure?"

"Mr. Butworth has ordered his yacht to be ready to sail at once," replied Helen, coldly.

"But we are all hungry now, I dare say," interjected Lady Edgethorne, briskly. "At least I feel a ravenous appetite. Let us gather in the clans."

The Viscount bowed and gave the two ladies precedence with a courteous sweep of the hand. He followed slowly.

"When the devil wants to play a sharp trick he employs a woman," he muttered through his teeth. "She means to have a rendezvous with *him*,—not a very lively one, I hope,—if Diego's wits are as keen as in times of old,"—an ugly shadow crept

over his face—"there may be distressing news when Morro Castle is reached," smiling grimly to himself.

"You seem to be in excellent humor, Viscount?" remarked Lady Sarah, looking back over her shoulder.

"In anticipation of Lady Edgethorne's enchanting hospitality," was Ybarra's oily response.

"Trummy," said Lady Edgethorne, addressing her consort, "have the kindness to inquire whether luncheon is nearly ready."

The Honorable Trumbull was about getting into full motion in the direction of the dining-hall when the steward appeared at the door and announced:

"My Lady, luncheon is served!"

"Your arm, Viscount, please. Prince Kropatchek, will you take Miss Wyndham in? Trummy and Mr. Wyndham, you will escort Miss Lane?"

Lady Sarah smiled reassuringly to Helen, who acknowledged the thoughtful pairing off with a grateful look.

And thus the little company went in to luncheon.

CHAPTER XXI

“ AND WOMAN DISPOSES ”

EVER since the hour when Viscount Ybarra had made his attempt to force Helen Lane to yield to his suit under cover of vague but only half-veiled threats against the aunt whom she loved so devotedly, the girl had lived in a perfect torment of apprehension. Over and again she had pondered his words and striven to find their hidden meaning. And just as often she had been compelled to admit that it was more in manner than in phrase that the unmistakable menace lay. But what was it? What could he have meant? What possible means could Ybarra have of damaging Mrs. Butworth? To all these questions there was never an answer for the girl. But at each turn of the problem there came over her with renewed and all-embracing emotion an unquenchable rage against the man who had dared to utter such words to her. With loathing and utter disgust she saw his attitude stripped bare of every form of decency with which he had sought to surround it. It was blackmail, pure and simple, she thought, but of the most vile and outrageous character that could be imagined. He was asking,—demanding with threats, rather,—that she pay herself to him as the price of his silence concerning her aunt. Oh, it was monstrous,—too horrible to be

believed! She knew, now, that it was not love for her which moved Ybarra. Nothing but the basest motive could inspire such a course!

And yet, what could she do? She had lived long enough in the Butworth mansion to understand thoroughly how the atmosphere of the social center in which her aunt moved was the very breath of life to her, and that its stoppage would mean physical as well as social asphyxiation. But ready as she was now to concede the lowest depth of infamy to Ybarra she could not bring herself to believe that he actually possessed any such destructive ammunition as he had implied. There were times when she was almost inclined to believe that it was all a figment of his imagination, merely a scheme conjured up on the instant in the desperate hope of overbearing her then and there and forcing a compliant answer. Then the terrible doubts would return, that fairly stifled her with their awful array of black consequences. And in that mood she cried out to herself in an agony of spirit: "Oh, what shall I do? What can I do?"

Indeed, what could the girl do? Never in her life had she felt such utter loneliness as now engulfed her. And she was so helpless before her trouble! At first her impulse had been to go straight to her aunt and disclose frankly and fully the detestable action of Ybarra. But what if in truth there was some ghastly secret in Mrs. Butworth's life which Ybarra had found out? Was that the hidden explanation of her aunt's insistency upon the match?

She put the hateful thought from her in an ecstasy of indignation that it ever should have entered her mind! And yet she could not keep her mental doors barred against it. It brought, too, at times, an ugly foster brother in the suggestion that perhaps it was knowledge of some dreadful thing done by her uncle which gave Ybarra his sinister confidence. There were things in the great world of finance in which the banker moved that were counted all right by business men, she knew, but which were accompanied by withering shame when pilloried in the light of publicity. Had Uncle Val fallen into such a pit? Once or twice she had fully resolved to go to him with the trouble, but before she could find the opportunity there had come the same revulsion of feeling that kept her from frank avowal of the situation to her aunt.

To whom could she turn for sympathy and advice? She canvassed the brief list of those whom she could call really her friends and found no answer. Utter isolation overwhelmed her. She was very wretched.

Try as she might she could see no light anywhere. There seemed no hope of relief. Acceptance of Ybarra was more hateful than ever, now. Yet she felt herself borne irresistibly toward it. She loathed him! His presence was hateful to her, his touch would be defilement. But if there were truth behind his dark threats she alone could save her aunt from a fate she knew Mrs. Butworth would consider worse than death. Yet was there that truth in the threats?

She knew no way of finding out. Every moment of Mrs. Butworth's life since she had been in the house had been apparently as open as the day. There was nothing in that, she was certain, on which Ybarra could have based his insinuations.

She had pondered these things until she was weary almost to exhaustion, yet she could gain neither explanation nor relief. "Wealth, and power, and station!" she cried out as she paced the floor of her boudoir. "Merciful heaven! What are they compared to poverty and peace. Oh, mother! mother! If only you were here! If I could only talk to you!"

It was the day after Lady Edgethorne's luncheon at the country club. Helen had acted promptly on her friend's suggestion for the yachting party and everything had been arranged. Mrs. Butworth had decided to stay at home when she found out that Lady Edgethorne would undertake to chaperone the party. The "Isona" was to leave Norfolk next day for the banker's hurried run to Havana, and the little party were to take the Butworth private car and go down that night so as to reach Norfolk the next morning in time for an early start on the voyage. Helen dreaded more than a little the searching inquisition of Lady Edgethorne which she knew she would have to endure through the trip. But she was grateful also for the sprightly Englishwoman's sympathy, and she recalled now, with a little flush of pleasure, the cleverness with which Lady Edgethorne had contrived to give her a few moments

tête-à-tête with Stewart Blake at the reception. But instantly the law of contrast brought Ybarra back, with his overhanging pall of trouble. Yet she even felt grateful to Ybarra, also, when she thought of it, for the forbearance he had shown at the reception, a forbearance not entirely overbalanced by his hateful behavior on the occasion of the ride to the country club. She did not understand the care with which the skilful Spaniard had planned his course of that night at her aunt's house and the masterful strategy of his restraint. She did not know how he had smiled at the thought of deliberately giving her time to overcome the reaction from his direct attack, and that yesterday he was merely emphasizing the contrast.

Heart-sick, brain-sick, and almost in despair the girl turned at length to seek relief in physical exhaustion, heading, on foot, for the solitudes of the great park where she could walk alone with her dreary thoughts. But she was fated to find other relief, for as she turned north at Dupont Circle she met Stewart Blake face to face. He was swinging briskly up the avenue headed toward the Butworth residence.

"I am in luck," he exclaimed, as she paused to greet him. "I was just going to see if I could find you in. I've been unfortunate about finding you lately."

She did not try to hide the pleasure she felt at seeing him again. "I am very glad," she said, simply, and faced about to return home.

"But you are just starting out?" he asked, quickly.

"Oh, only for a walk," she replied. "I was tired of staying in the house."

"Then perhaps I may join you?" he suggested; "it's my favorite exercise."

"Will you?" she asked, and turned again to the north. "But perhaps you are not in my mood to-day. I set out to walk myself sleepy. I mean to go until I am tired out."

In her manner as well as in her words there was a suggestion that gave Blake a sudden tightening about the heart. For there was already a weariness in the voice that betokened her weariness of spirit. He glanced shrewdly at her, but her face was averted and she stepped forward so briskly that he found himself obliged to pay attention to his walking to keep up. The air was fresh and nipping, with the cold sunlight glinting from the snow patches in a hard, metallic sheen. It was such a day as always filled Stewart Blake with joy, and to walk thus, with Helen Lane for his companion, would have been unalloyed delight, but for the intangible restraint he felt rather than observed, about her manner and her words.

"You need a rest," he suggested, "the social strain is too great."

"Yes," she replied, in that same weary voice, "I do need rest. I——"

She did not finish the sentence, and Blake's quick glance caught what he thought was a suffusion of the eyes not due to the bracing air they were facing.

"You are in trouble," he said, softly, and there was a note in his voice she could not fail to mark. "I wish I could be of service. I—I—forgive me! I have no right to be saying such things to you. But I——" and then his throat filled up with a sudden lump that choked his voice and he fell silent. She, too, said nothing, but only gazed ahead, and they walked on thus into the park.

"You have been very busy," she said, at last, with strange, stiff formality.

"Yes," he replied. "The Department is working hard just now."

"Will there be war?"

"I don't know," he said. "I hope not, but I am afraid it will come."

"Afraid it will?" she questioned, "I thought all navy men hoped for it."

In some moods Blake might have taken that for a note of challenge of his courage, but in her level, constrained tones he found only the polite effort to make some sort of conversation.

"Yes, I am afraid it will come," he repeated. "I know what many of them are saying, and I know the glamor and the glory of it, and all that. But war is something more than glory, Miss Lane, even for those who die gloriously in it. And not all of us might be fortunate enough to die gloriously."

She looked at him now, for the first time since they met, with sudden curious interest. The matter of fact way he had of speaking about death surprised

her. But she felt the sincerity of it, and knew there was no question of courage with this man.

"You would go," she said, slowly, as if a new and significant fact had suddenly come home to her.

"I hope to, of course," he answered.

"You would command a ship?"

"Again that is my hope, but there are so many older men than I that I am hardly justified in hoping. They might give me a small command."

"Do you hate the Spaniards?" she asked, with sudden directness.

It surprised Blake out of his balance. "No," he answered, quickly. "I hate nobody. But, yes, there is one Spaniard whom I do hate, Miss Lane, and I am unchristian enough to confess it. But it would not be because of hatred of him that I should fight his countrymen if it became my duty."

"I know," she said, soberly. "But wouldn't that one hatred help you against the others?"

"I had a chance to fight him once," he said, irrelevantly, "and then something happened to spoil it. Yes, if I could feel that he was always my 'first objective' perhaps it would lend some zest to the work."

They were well in the park now, swinging along the hard road with steady stride, and he saw the flush the exercise had brought back to her pale cheeks.

"You had a chance to fight him once, the man you hate, and didn't?" She muttered the words musingly, half repeating what he said, half questioning his meaning.

"I had not meant to tell you that," he said, slowly. "or, indeed, ever to speak to you of that man. He is a man you know,—perhaps admire. I—perhaps you heard of my chance meeting with an old acquaintance at your aunt's reception? I met that man first in Europe last year; in Paris first, I think. And afterward, by accident, or design, he met me in several other places. The last time was in Venice, the very day I started home."

He paused and seemed studying how to go on.

"I was in Venice last fall," said the girl.

"I know," he answered. "You were in Venice that very day."

"That day?" she repeated, wonderingly. "You knew, then?"

"No, not then, at least not until I had begun to hate this Spaniard. He had forced himself upon me and we were out in a gondola on the grand canal. Ahead of us some people were singing. They were Americans, and they sang home songs. Then one of them sang alone a song that is very dear to me, a setting of 'In a Gondola' done by an old friend of mine. And this Spaniard was moved just then to jest at the singer. So I knocked him out of the boat, and then when I had fished him back in again he challenged me to fight."

"Oh," she cried, "a duel, and you——"

"Didn't fight," he went on, quickly. "No, I ran away and so 'lived to fight another day.'"

"I don't believe it," she said, facing him suddenly, with flashing eyes.

"Don't believe what?" he asked, good-humoredly, "this story? Ask Kropatchek. He was there. He told the story to us the other night at the reception, only he didn't know the two men he talked about were myself and Ybarra."

"Ybarra!"

Her surprise was complete. Nothing she had known of Blake had given her the slightest cue to the identity of the man to whom he had been referring, and the disclosure came at last with startling suddenness. But the walking and the story, and the companionship with Blake, had taken her out of herself for a time, and her weariness and trouble had been forgotten temporarily. She had regained something of her old poise, and now even despite the shock of this abrupt return to it, she was able to retort banteringly:

"Now, more than ever, I don't believe that you ran away from that fight."

"No?" he said, lightly. "Then ask Ybarra. He has been swearing ever since that if I had stayed he would have killed me. So I'm glad I came away, for if he had I should not have been here."

But his jest had not served to keep back the shadow that settled again on her face at the renewed mention of Ybarra. He saw it, and instantly the emotion that filled him brimmed over and he began to speak straight from his heart and straight to hers.

"You know why that song is dear to me? I remember the first time I heard it sung. I had known the composer for years, but the first of his

music that I heard was sung for me here in Washington by a girl whom I met only the day before I started for a cruise on the Asiatic station. She was a beautiful girl and she had a beautiful voice. And she knew and understood,—she comprehended and sang that song. I went away to China with it ringing in my heart, where I carried her face. They have been there, Helen, ever since."

She put out her hand as if to stay him, but he paid no heed and went on, swiftly, in a voice vibrating with emotion.

"I was three years on the China station, and never once heard from or of that girl. But in my heart I saw her face and heard her song day and night. Then I came back to Washington. But she was gone. 'In Europe,' they told me. I, too, went to Europe, and there had the misfortune to meet this unwhipped hound,—I beg your pardon. And there I heard that voice actually sing that song again! And this—this, forgive me—I can't mention him decently. Then I came home, and you know the rest. You know how I love you, Helen. I have tried to wait for what they call a 'proper' time to tell you so, but what's the use? It's no news to you now—it would be no more by and by."

Unconsciously, as he talked they had slackened pace until now they stopped and faced each other. And he saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

She shook her head, sadly, and tried to speak, but the words would not come. He took her hands in his, and she did not resist.

"I do not ask you to give me an answer now, dear," he went on, "but yet I hope for that another day. For I remember that you, too, remembered. You told me so that day here in the woods when Dandy was bad to you and good to me."

Again she shook her head, and this time found utterance. "No, Stewart," she said, softly, "I cannot. I—there cannot be the answer you want. Oh, I am——"

The old choking weariness was in her voice again, that weariness of pain and trouble that cut his heart like a dagger and overcame and drowned out the thrill she had given him by speaking his name. And now the weary voice trailed off into a whisper. "I am so tired," she said, "please take me home!"

They tramped the return miles in almost unbroken silence. Once or twice, when she faltered a little and he suggested resting or telephoning for a carriage, she shook her head in negation and plodded on.

Tumult was raging in his heart. Out of the whole unfathomable mystery all that he knew was that some great trouble lay on her like a blight and he raged that he could not help. As often as he had dared a glance at her face he had seen tears glistening in her eyes. They had turned into the avenue and were nearing her home when his emotion a little overcame him.

"Forgive me, Helen, if it gives you pain," he said, "but I must say this. I do not understand what

the trouble is, and do not ask now to understand. But, dear, I wish I could help! "

She turned to him with outstretched hand and a sob in her throat. And again she gave him his name. " You are very good, Stewart," she said. " Good-night."

He turned away with the touch of her hand tingling in his blood, and that half-suppressed sob tearing at his heart. He had almost reached his quarters before he recalled the fact that in his emotion while with her he had forgotten to tell her, as he intended, that he was going away. Nor had he an inkling that she, too, was starting for Havana that very night.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STROKE OF A RAZOR

WHEN Stewart Blake started for Havana that night he found himself, for the first time in his naval service, reluctant to enter upon new duty. There were officers—plenty of them—whom he knew, who had made it a business to develop political influence wherever they could for the assistance it would give them in securing pleasant assignments. Blake had never been one of them. He had entered the navy for pure love of it, and beyond his joy in the sea and the ships, and in the contact with the sturdy men who made up the fighting force afloat, there was a foundation of sterling patriotism which had actuated him from the first. Not wealthy, as Americans count wealth, but with sufficient means to enable him to engage in any business which attracted him, he had deliberately chosen the navy for its career. There was nothing mercenary or sordid about him.

Such being his motives he had sought only to have duty that would give him opportunity to work at anything that would count. He had a sturdy ambition, and up to this time nothing had ever interfered with his strict attention to whatever duty came to him. He had not believed it possible that anything ever could divert him. Throughout the navy he was

known as the one man who was always ready for anything; who had an absorbed and utter devotion to his profession to the complete subordination of all personal interests. The fact was he never had had any personal interests before this. It was an entirely new sensation to Blake to find himself thinking of something else rather than his work. And that that something else should cause him to regret an order surprised and shocked him. But it did not lessen the regret. It showed him also the depth of his feeling for Helen Lane, and revealed to him the underlying force of sentiment in his character that neither he nor any of his fellows had suspected. He had become accustomed to regarding himself somewhat as a machine, turning obediently at once to whatever work was set for it to do. Now he found that after all he was merely human, with human feelings and emotions which racked him as he had seen many another man racked. Then he had wondered and failed to comprehend. Now he understood with painful thoroughness.

But there was no question of failure to obey promptly and to the fullest extent of his ability. The strong sense of duty had not been overborne or even touched by his love for Helen Lane, and while this intensely personal matter could make him regret deeply having to leave Washington just at what he felt to be the most critical moment, it could not and did not once suggest to him the advisability or desirability of asking Admiral Crunfield to select another man for this duty. He even upbraided himself that it

should have occupied his thoughts so much when there was work to be considered. And he told himself, foolishly, that once he had actually left Washington and was on his way to Havana, he could put these thoughts of personal affairs out of his mind and devote himself again to duty with all his old-time concentration. Such is the simplicity of young lovers.

He found, however, that the fullness of his passion overwhelmed him. He went to the train half in a daze. He took no notice of his surroundings or of the persons who were to be his fellow-passengers. It was utterly unlike the observant Blake who had visited the capitals of Europe on "special duty" only a few months before. He hardly noted the number of his berth in the sleeping-car, and did not once regret the delay in securing accommodation which had deprived him of the accustomed stateroom. He did not care for the privacy of drawn curtains and shut doors now. He had a new-found privacy of his own, into which he could withdraw himself and be as utterly alone as if lost on the desert of Gobi. His head and his heart filled to overflowing with that one great question which had occupied him, waking and dreaming, ever since his interview with the girl. He would not go so far as to tell himself that she already returned his love. But he was satisfied that she was willing to love him. It was not for his sake that there was objection. No circumstances connected with him, he assured himself, had caused the hesitation and evident distress that had

marked her bearing during that last meeting. Then what was it? Turn where he might, all his thinking led at last to that unsolvable riddle. Why?

This was a new Stewart Blake who sat huddled in his corner, staring blankly out of the window into the darkness with eyes that saw neither hill nor dale as the train rushed along into the night. None of his naval comrades would have recognized this mood if any of them had chanced to see him then. But to the young man in the opposite section, furtively watching the officer from under his shaggy brows, there was nothing in Blake's bearing that did not comport exactly with the character that had been described to him that night when he had undertaken this daring mission.

This young man was riding backward, with his head leaning against a pillow jammed into the corner by the window, so that his face was turned half toward the aisle, and he could fix his heavy-lidded eyes occasionally on Blake with no danger of exciting comment or even of attracting attention. A close and suspicious observer might have noticed the slight flush on the sallow cheeks and deduced an ominous cause for it. But Stewart Blake had laid aside suspicion for the nonce and it is doubtful if he had so much as seen the young man opposite.

A white-aproned porter, giving the last call for supper, paused and spoke directly to Blake, arousing him from his reverie to the fact that, having become human enough to fall in love, he was also human enough to be hungry.

For a minute or two after Blake had sought the dining-car the heavy-eyed young man opposite continued to stare idly ahead, as if he had not noticed Blake at all. Then he yawned and stretched himself, as if arousing from a doze, and busied himself with his grip, taking out two or three magazines and ostentatiously preparing for an evening of reading. He looked over the magazines carelessly, and at length selected one for his immediate use. Then he looked at his watch and gave a little exclamation as if surprised at the hour. Thereupon he, too, went forward to the dining-car, carrying his magazine along. And as he walked, anyone who chanced to observe closely his right hand, in which he held the magazine, would have noticed that the middle finger was missing.

Viscount Ybarra's agent of assassination was about his brutal business. The fine art of murdering by means of detached dynamite bombs which are set off by the victims themselves had not been developed in the days when these Spaniards plotted against the life of this American officer. It remained for Rufino to devise his own method of assassination, and to execute it as best he could, trusting to the fortunate circumstances of the moment to escape detection. At heart he was a coward, and Diego knew it. But Diego did not know of the confession in the secret service offices that showed the detectives to be already alert, and even if he had known it he probably would not have hesitated long about employing Rufino on this business. For he understood the desperate con-

dition of the young assassin, and moreover he had such knowledge of the young man's antecedents as to give him practically complete power over his freedom, if not his life. It was only the recognition of these facts that had driven Rufino to accept this latest commission, so soon after his arrest had demonstrated the fact that the police were watching him.

Some experience in crime the young assassin had, but not in murder. He was keenly aware that it was a dangerous as well as difficult task he had to perform, and that his own life might pay the penalty. But he had the instinct of assassination which told him that the simplest means he could employ would be not only the surest but the safest. So he waited for the development of his opportunity, intending to employ the means at hand whenever the chance offered itself.

If murder did not usually require some deep-seated motive, how many a crime might be casually committed and the criminal go unscathed. Rufino was not calculating upon this fact, he was simply trusting to luck, and luck favored him this very night. The plan that came to him after much cogitation was born of no thought of his own. It was the inspiration of his criminal genius, flashed full grown upon him in an instant from a subtle suggestion furnished by Blake himself. The assassin's dark eyes snapped as the simplicity of the thing unfolded itself before him, and he saw how easily the crime could be committed and the criminality laid at the door of the victim

himself. It took but a few moments to elaborate every detail of his course.

It was such a little thing that gave him the suggestion. Watching Blake furtively out of the corner of his eye as they sat in their places after dinner, he saw the officer open his gripsack that lay by his feet and take out some papers. Blake had at last forced himself to go through the form, at least, of thinking about his work. As the papers were removed the assassin saw, lying on top of the other things in the bag, a leather case from which protruded slightly the handle of a razor. That was all, but it was enough.

Reclining against the pillow in his corner the assassin ostensibly devoted himself to his magazine until he saw Blake's berth made up. Presently he noticed Blake preparing to turn in, and saw, with a little leap of the heart, that, after taking what he wanted from the gripsack, Blake stowed it casually on the floor under the berth. Watching with cat-like stealth under his heavy lids Rufino noted the ease with which the bag could be withdrawn from its place without attracting the least attention elsewhere in the car. Then he went to the smoking-room to pass the hours until midnight should bring the time for his work.

There was no hesitaton or indecision in the assassin's mind as he puffed his cigarettes and watched the snow-flecked country whirl by from the smoking-room window. His curious thought dwelt rather upon the ease with which his task was about to be

accomplished, and the size of the reward he was to obtain for it.

He was surprised when the porter came and asked him to vacate the room. It was already midnight, and the porter wanted to make up his own berth in the smoking-room for the few hours' sleep he was permitted to snatch during the run. Rufino had not counted on this, but he recognized at once the assistance it lent to his plan to have the porter securely out of the way for the next few hours. He noticed with satisfaction as he went to his berth that only the lights at the ends of the car were burning and they had been turned so low as to make the passage between the rows of berths very dim. He had to fumble at the curtain over his berth for a moment or two to see the number and make sure he was at the right place. Then he bent his head toward Blake's curtains and listened. He smiled a little as he thought that above the roar of the train he could distinguish the regular breathing of a man asleep.

The assassin proceeded leisurely to prepare for the night as if he were any honest citizen intending to get into his bed and sleep there. He knew that the train was running through sparsely settled country, with important stations long distances apart, and that he was not likely to be interrupted by stops. When he had completed all his preparations, he leaned forward from the edge of his berth and grasped the end of Blake's gripsack. It moved easily, and he dragged it quickly out from under the berth and thrust it into his own. Then he went at the catch.

Again luck favored him. It was not locked. It needed no light for him to find what he wanted. He came first on a little bundle of papers and was about to take them. But no, he thought, if he should be searched there would be a sure clew. He put them back and looked for the leather case he had seen. He found it directly on top of the pile of clothing in the bag, and an instant's fumbling in the dark was sufficient to enable him to remove the razor. Impulsively he opened it and tried its edge across his thumb. Then he shut up the bag again, and, glancing out to see that the way was clear, thrust it quickly back into its old place underneath Blake's berth. He was all ready now, and in another minute Lieutenant-Commander Blake would have met an end that all the world would ascribe to self-destruction. The assassin chuckled softly to himself with pleasure at his own shrewdness. Then he deftly unbuttoned the curtains in front of his victim and stepped inside them, bending over the berth to avoid attracting the attention of any train official who might happen to pass.

The night was dark. Clouds covered the sky and there was no moon. But Blake had left his curtains up, and in the reflection from the patches of white snow through which they were running Rufino had no trouble in making out the form of his victim. Blake was lying on his left side, with his right hand thrown up over his head. This brought him face to the aisle and threw his throat into deep shadow. For a moment or so the assassin paused, striving to see

clearly just where to strike. He meant to make one clean gash across the throat, drop the razor on the body, and leap back into his own berth. Then, when the body should be found in the morning, the evidence of Blake's own razor beside it would be all that was needed to establish the means and method of death.

What anatomist of fate can surely develop the cause from the effect? Perhaps it was that some unusual lurching of the car disturbed the posture of the sleeper. It had been a troubled sleep at best that Blake had had that night. The body, indeed, reposed, but the brain went worrying on about its complicated problems of love and duty, half-unconscious, half-awake. Perhaps it was the subconscious knowledge of the presence of an intruder. Whatever the cause, just at the instant that the assassin braced himself for the fatal stroke, and grasping the razor tightly in his hand threw forward his arm with what he intended to be a death blow, at that instant Blake roused from his uneasy doze and sleepily stretched his right arm in front of him. It met the descending arm of the assassin and stopped the razor blow halfway.

Instantly Blake was wide awake, with every faculty alert. Such is the awakening power of imminent danger! In the dusk of the curtained berth he was aware of the shadow of a man standing before him, and on the instant struck out with all the force he could throw into the blow, hampered as he was by his position. His thought was merely that he had

awakened just in time to catch a thief trying to rob him. There was no suspicion of graver danger.

The blow caught the assassin fairly in the pit of the stomach and doubled him up backward. As he fell through the curtains, still grasping the razor, its keen edge flashed across the hand with which Blake had just struck and left a gash across the four fingers.

Quickly as Blake acted the assassin was quicker. Before Blake could extricate himself from the tangle of curtains before him so as to catch a glimpse through the dimly lighted aisle Rufino had thrown himself backward into his berth and drawn the blankets up to his chin. By the time Blake had gained an erect position in the aisle the assassin lay with his face to his window in well-feigned sleep.

Blake's impulse was to fight, and not to cry out, so that he had made no disturbance. Now that he found himself alone in the aisle, with no sign or sound of his assailant he was almost persuaded that he was a victim of nightmare, but the smarting of his fingers made him look at them, and he saw the gash from which the blood was flowing freely. At the same moment he saw his own razor lying on the floor.

Instantly he comprehended what had happened. It was murder and not robbery, which his assailant had intended. The thought steadied Blake immediately, and checked his natural impulse to rouse the car. Instead he sat down on the edge of his berth, drew out his bag, and carefully adjusted a bandage

to his wounded fingers. Fortunately the gash across them was not deep and no damage was done. As he worked at that his mind now clear and alert went over the circumstances of the afternoon and evening. He had no difficulty in divining the source of the attack. The question that occupied him most was which of the other occupants of the car had struck him. Obviously it must be someone very near his own berth. Otherwise such prompt escape would not have been possible. Very well, then, in the morning he would take careful note of his immediate neighbors, and on the result would depend his future course. He was on his guard now, and had no fear of a second attack that night. Nevertheless, he would take no chance and would stand guard himself until morning.

The car was cold, and he found himself shivering in his pajamas. He began to dress, intending to lie in his clothes in the berth so as not to go to sleep again. No one else moved in the car and he proceeded in leisurely fashion. He had nearly dressed himself, and with his coat lying on the berth beside him was stooping over his gripsack putting away his pajamas and the razor when he was aware of a sudden checking of the speed of the train and felt the emergency brakes thrown on. The next instant there came a heavy grinding sound and the train stopped with a shock that sent Blake sprawling headlong down the aisle. Then a fearful crash. The car rocked and staggered as if hit a terrific blow, then toppled over on its side and slid down the em-

bankment. From every berth came cries and shrieks and groans. Halfway down the slope the car rolled again and brought up at the bottom fairly on its roof. Blake was in a heap in one corner, with his coat about his head and his traveling bag in the small of his back. He was badly shaken up, but felt no serious hurt, and in the wild confusion that filled the car set about finding some means of exit. Already men were crawling out of the broken windows, and even as they did so flames began to lick up from the broken gas tanks. Blake slipped into his coat and threw his bag before him from a window. He shouted a harsh command to the others in the car to stop their cries and tried to get some order out of the tumult. The "parade rasp" in his voice cut through the confusion and for a moment carried his purpose. But the leaping flames drove the frantic passengers into redoubled efforts to save themselves, and trampling down everything in their way they strove to reach such windows as offered means of escape. Out of the struggling mass Blake saw a woman dragged from a window by a frenzied man. A broken piece of a heavy end board of a berth lay at his feet. He picked it up and laid about him with it among the men struggling at the windows.

"Stand back," he shouted. "Get the women out first."

By this time men were ready outside the car to help, and Blake, standing guard inside saw first one and then another and then a third woman passed

out to safety. Under his leadership the men remaining in the car had taken a new grip on themselves, and when all the women were out they went, rapidly, but without that frantic rush that would have endangered them all. And as he passed out himself Blake thought that among those men was the one who had just tried to kill him.

"Perhaps I have saved his life now," he said to himself, half bitterly. "But next time——" And then he realized the childishness of the threat and laughed at himself.

There was plenty of help now, and Blake found himself free to secure his own belongings. It was a terrible wreck, a head-on collision with another passenger train, and many lives had been lost among the passengers in the day coaches. In the sleepers not many had been injured, and none killed. The passengers, clad for the most part in their night clothing, huddled around the wreck and kept warm by the fires of the burning cars. Toward morning came the relief train, with surgeons and nurses for the injured and clothing and food for the unhurt. Blake had already shared the contents of his bag with other men, and had given a coat to a heavy-eyed, sallow-faced young man who remained most of the time near him expressing his gratitude in a guttural voice slightly marked by a foreign accent that Blake did not quite distinguish. Thus a second time he had unwittingly befriended the man who had attempted to kill him.

The old saying that men born for the gallows will never die in bed had another proof that night. The assassin had so wrapped himself up in blankets as evidence of having been asleep that when the crash came they served as cushions and saved him from all injury. When the car ceased rolling he found himself opposite his own window and promptly crawled through it to safety. He even had time to take his own trousers, and now with Blake's coat was fairly comfortable. When he first saw Blake he had the wit to speak to him as if nothing unusual had occurred that night, and when he found that he was not at once seized as an assassin he argued that Blake did not associate him with the assault, and he was free to try some other scheme.

Blake's first care on reaching a station was to report by telegraph to the Department. He added that he was uninjured and had lost nothing of importance, and would continue the journey by the first train. When the new train was ready Blake climbed aboard with a feeling of great relief. He had secured a stateroom this time, and with a solid door between him and his fellow-passengers he felt there was not so great an opportunity for enemies as the open sleeper had afforded. The wreck had robbed him of the chance to study those near him in the car and he had no inkling as to the identity of the man who had struck at him. He felt now that it was a case of maintaining the closest personal watch throughout the remainder of the trip, for he had no doubt that the agency which had planned that first

attempt on his life would redouble its energies henceforth.

As the train moved out he summoned the porter and with a substantial tip to reinforce his instructions gave orders to have the door locked and to permit no one to disturb him that afternoon under any pretext whatever. Then he lay down to do what he could to repair the broken rest of the night. He had no notion that the same train was also bearing southward the heavy-eyed young man to whom he had given a coat as they stood beside the burning wreck.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DELICATE ART OF KNIFE-THROWING

BLAKE found that he had been more shaken up by the wreck than he had believed at first. And he was glad of the opportunity to rest at Jacksonville. The delay had lost his steamer connection at Tampa and so he was going by way of Miami. That gave him a whole day to sit quiet and get himself together again. And he needed it, not only for recuperation from his dangerous experience in the wreck, but for consideration of his own circumstances. It was certain that the enemy who had tried once to have him murdered would not rest on that failure, and Blake knew that it behooved him to keep close watch on himself. He was going to a city where assassination was an easy and lucrative trade, and he had work to do that might offer exceptionally favorable opportunities to men intent on taking his life. All during the long tedious ride from Jacksonville down the east coast Blake pondered these things as he had during the day in the city. But nothing suggested itself to him in the way of a definite plan for future action. Caution, eternal caution, watchfulness that relaxed at no point, that, he felt was the measure of his safety. It was more than a mere suspicion on his part that Ybarra was at the bottom of the attempt on his life. It

was a conviction. But where he would know how to guard against and meet Ybarra himself and his personal machinations, he realized that he was at a disadvantage in not knowing any of Ybarra's agents. The blow was coming from the dark, in that respect, and it devolved upon him therefore to suspect and watch every man who approached him whom he did not know to be a friend.

And as he pondered these things there flooded over him at intervals the waves of a supreme tenderness that engulfed and overwhelmed him with emotion. Complicated though the problem of his duty was it was as simple as the noonday daylight compared with the complexity of this problem of love. If he had been a sentimentalist Stewart Blake would never have reached that stage of his life before facing that problem. But he was of the practical, matter-of-fact sort to whom the deluge of such feeling comes with amazement also, and who seek at first to force heart and head to coincide. It filled Blake with dismay to find his head saying to him that he had no right to make a proposal of marriage to such a girl as Helen Lane. He was not wealthy and could never maintain her, if she should become his wife, in any such manner as she had been accustomed to. The responsibility at times almost appalled him. He thought, too, of the difficulties arising from his profession. It was not fair or right, he had often held, for men to marry who knew that practically half their time they must be away from home.

So he would go on, conjuring up one perplexity

after another, only to have his heart step in at the last and sweep them all aside with the one simple fact that he loved her. Soul called to soul and all the world was forgotten, with its materialities and its everyday questions of hard fact. Soul called to soul, and there was but one answer. Every time it came the same, and Blake would lie back against his cushions and surrender himself wholly to the joy of it. For somehow, when that answer came to him, it carried with it complete satisfaction of all the doubts that had distressed him since their meeting the afternoon before he left Washington. He did not know and could not imagine what were the difficulties which confronted her. He knew not what troubles were in her path. But somehow, in some way as yet unopened, everything would be smoothed away and in the end love would triumph. Love! Unseen, intangible, incomprehensible! Yet the most potent force in all the world! The one continuing, unexplained answer to the everlasting riddle of life.

There had been delay on the way down from Jacksonville. Blake did not know why, nor did he ask. Introspection had occupied him all the day, and although it was after midnight when the train rolled out to the pier alongside which lay the little ship that was to take him to Havana, Blake had not noticed the time or questioned the length of the journey. It was with something of a shock that he came back to himself and his surroundings when the car porter came to get his luggage and set him off the train. Blake walked quickly up the gang-plank

and stopped with half a dozen others in front of the purser's window. Then, when he had registered with the purser and secured his accommodations he went immediately to his cabin and turned in for the night. Despite his repeated resolutions to maintain a constant watch on those about him he had not thought to observe his fellow-passengers closely. For the moment it did not occur to him that any danger possibly could lurk in such a place.

Even if Blake had been giving that attention to his surroundings which he had so frequently promised himself to give it is possible that he would not have thought it more than a coincidence at seeing the heavy-eyed young man who had been in the wreck with him also a passenger on the Havana boat. He might even have failed to recognize the young man as having been on the ill-starred train. But Rufino had not failed to mark Blake. He had the advantage, of course, of knowing his quarry, and as long as Blake remained absolutely unsuspecting of his identity, as manifestly he still was, the young assassin had no difficulty in keeping close to the trail of his victim. He was standing in the group by the purser's office when Blake registered, and heard the naval officer give the steward who took his grip the number of his cabin. Presently he was himself assigned to quarters. It took but a minute to find his cabin and stow his small luggage. Then he strolled down the corridor idly looking about the ship, and out on the after-deck where he leaned against the rail and watched the stevedores on the

pier hustling the last of the freight aboard. There was still a large quantity to load and Rufino saw it would be some hours before the ship could sail. As on the train he had no fixed plan and was merely watching for any favorable circumstance to turn up.

After a while he turned and began to explore the ship more closely. The best of the first-class cabins were on the main deck a little abaft amidships, with the quarter-deck open for a promenade. Outside the cabins there was a deck space next the rail, narrowing to its end at the amidships deckhouse. Any one promenading on the quarter-deck could walk forward on either side of the ship nearly to her beam. The latter part of such a walk would bring one directly out on this space, so that when the shutters were down one walking there could see into the cabins as well as if he were actually inside.

Rufino had already noted the numbers of these cabins, and knew that Blake had been assigned to one on the starboard side of the ship. It was the second from the deckhouse that blocked the narrow promenade. Rufino saw, as he walked by it, that the outer shutters were up. No one else was on the deck near him, and presently he tried the shutters gently, with his fingers, and found them fastened, apparently with a hook, at the top. He, too, had a deck cabin, but on the other side of the ship and forward. He went to it at once and examined the shutters. When not in use they were lowered into a slide in the wall of the cabin. A hook at the top was the evident means of fastening them when

raised, and a series of eyelet screws in the window frame gave opportunity to set them at varying heights as desired. It would not take very great pressure, Rufino found, to force the small hook from its fastenings. Then he went back to study Blake's window.

The rattle of the derrick gear and the clatter of the steam winches drowned the sound of his footsteps on the deck. The stevedores were working at the forward hold and their arc light on the pier threw a glare around that part of the ship. But aft of the deckhouse, where Rufino was, there was strong shadow, and he was in small danger of interruption. He thrust his fingers between the shutters but could not force them far enough to make certain whether the window was shut or open. Then he tried his pocketknife, but it was a small one, and the upward slant of the shutters so deflected its direction that when that too, even with the blade open, failed to strike glass, he was not sure that the window was down. He looked around for something that would serve better, and, finding nothing, finally left the ship and went down on the pier, meaning to get a long, thin stick that he could push far enough through the shutters to show conclusively whether or not the window was open.

The hustling stevedores paid no attention to him as he prowled around the boxes and bales of goods on the pier. They were so intent upon their work that none of them noticed him even when he stopped quickly and picked up an object which he thrust in-

stantly into his trousers pocket. He went on with his hunt and presently found a long sliver which he thought would answer his purpose. Twiddling that in his fingers he went slowly back up the gang-plank, stopping for a moment to watch a load swung in from the pier, and then straight to his own cabin. There, with the door locked and the shutters tightly fastened over his window he drew his find from his pocket and examined it. It was a knife such as sailors carry in their belts, with a stout handle and strong blade. One touch of the edge and point convinced him of their sharpness. He tried it on his sliver and smiled as he saw how fine a shaving it drew. Here was a weapon made to his order and with no tell-tale association about it that would lead the hunt to his trail after its work was done. He chuckled at the thought of his good luck, and went forth to see what he could find out about Blake's window.

Gradually a plan was taking form in his mind. He did not see it clearly and entirely as yet, but somehow it was to work around that window and to be accomplished with that knife. He knew a trick or two that could be turned with a knife like that. Give him but a little room to swing his arm for a throw and he could make a knife as deadly a weapon at twenty feet as it would be held in a strong hand. He began to feel that the most difficult and dangerous part of his work was nearly accomplished.

Cargo was still going down the open hatch with a rattle and a bang when Rufino stopped again by

Blake's cabin window. He leaned innocently against the rail and waited until certain that no loitering passenger or prowling watchman was looking on, and then quickly thrust the long sliver through the shutters. It went in a foot or more unobstructed, and he knew that the window was open. He tested again, at the top of the shutters, with the same result. The window had been let clear down and there was only the shutter between himself and his victim.

The assassin leaned against the rail again and considered his problem. Should he force the shutter and make the attempt now, or wait for another chance the next night? They were leaving Miami so late that he knew they could not reach Havana the next day and he reasoned that probably they would lie at Key West at least until after midnight, so that the early morning run across to Havana should not bring them in too early at the Cuban capital. There would be ample opportunity for his work, he thought, during the crossing from Key West to Cuba.

Then he reflected that if he did the work immediately the probability was that it would be ascribed to some of the workers on the dock whose motive would be robbery. But if he waited until the ship was at sea it would be known that the man who did it was on board, and his danger would be increased. This decided him to make the effort then and there. But he was still uninformed as to the interior arrangement of Blake's cabin. If he could succeed in forcing the shutter so gently as not to

disturb the sleeping man inside he might have time to peer in and locate his victim accurately before throwing the knife. And if things went wrong, and Blake awoke, he could feign drunkenness and make out that he had fallen against the shutter in a drunken lurch. From the position of the window he decided that the berth must be athwartship, as in his own cabin. He went into the passageway and examined the door. It was locked, but that of the next cabin being merely fastened by a big hook at the top, so as to leave it open a few inches, he saw that in that cabin the door was on one side and the berth on the other. So he concluded that in Blake's room the berth would be against the bulkhead at his right as he looked through the window. With his mind clear on that point he was ready for action.

But fate—or something else—interfered. When the assassin again reached the narrow promenade he found a gang of longshoremen busily swinging a great arc lamp into position to light their work at the after-hatch. The window of Blake's cabin would be fairly under the glare of that great electric eye. With a muttered curse as he realized that his chance for that night was gone, Rufino turned to his own cabin, locked the door, and threw himself upon his bunk for such sleep as comes to assassins foiled of their prey.

All day the little vessel crawled down the Florida coast, skirting the keys. It was a fine fresh day, and Blake sat on deck and smoked and dreamed of love and duty. It was evening when they arrived

at Key West, and as soon as he had ascertained that they would not sail before one o'clock Blake set off to look up some of his colleagues stationed there, and to send a message to Admiral Crunfield, reporting progress.

Strolling through the passageways during the day Rufino had taken occasion to peep into Blake's cabin and confirm his impression of its arrangement. He estimated the distance from the window to the head of the berth and made a mental calculation of just how he should have to throw the knife when the time came to complete his work. He saw Blake leave the ship and at first felt some misgiving lest his victim was about to quit the journey and he should have to undertake a more difficult part. Then he noted that Blake had not taken his gripsack and concluded rightly that it was only a call on friends or a tour of curiosity. So he went ashore himself to visit the delights which Key West affords to that sort of callers.

It was midnight when Rufino returned to the ship. He went to his cabin and began to prepare for leaving the ship at Havana. In Jacksonville he had imitated Blake in restocking himself with clothing. Now he got out the light suit he intended to wear ashore at the Cuban city, readjusted his personal belongings, and packed away the clothes he had been wearing. Then he lay down, intending to doze for an hour or two. But sleep did not come, and presently he rose again, dressed, and went out on the deck to smoke. Apparently Blake had returned to

the ship, for his door was closed and the shutter was raised as it had been the night before. But this time Blake had not been so cautious, and the shutter was not hauled clear to the top. There was a space of a couple of inches which it did not cover, and the assassin chuckled as he saw it, for there was the opportunity to release the hook without risking the noise of forcing the fastening. The work was as good as done. He had never doubted his ability to send the knife home once he got a fair chance to throw it, and now he was certain of that.

He went back to his cabin and completed his preparations for going ashore by taking from the leathern pocket he had worn suspended around his neck the letter Diego had given him for delivery to General Blanco. That he placed in the pocket of the coat he was wearing. He meant to be first ashore and early at the Palace. With the knife sent home and that letter delivered his work would all be done and he would be free to enjoy the full reward he had earned. He tried again to sleep, but was too nervous. He was afraid to be seen about the deck too much, lest it should be remembered against him when the discovery of the crime was made. So he lay tossing about on the bunk and waiting dumbly for the hour to strike. At last he heard the men on deck preparing to cast off. Then he felt the throb of the propeller and presently the ship was in motion. They were off, at last, for Havana! A few hours more and his task would be completed!

One bell in the morning watch struck and still Rufino was lying on his bunk. He had waited deliberately until after four o'clock, counting on having densest darkness then. And after the watch had changed at eight bells there would be a period of greater quiet when he would be less liable to interruption.

When he stepped out on the deck in the starlight there was no hint yet of dawn. The time was perfectly chosen. The deck was deserted and there was nothing to interfere with him. He moved swiftly around to Blake's window and thrust his fingers over the top of the shutter. Softly, without trouble and without the least noise, he lifted the hook and gently lowered the shutter to the bottom. The window was so low that he could put his head and shoulders through into the room. Cautiously, but very quickly, he worked. He leaned as far forward as he could, and felt, rather than saw, that Blake was lying flat on his back, with his arms thrown over his head. It was the position Rufino would have chosen for his victim if he could have selected one, for it gave him the best target of all for the knife. He raised his right arm, poising the knife by the tip of its keen point and feinting two or three times in preparation for the throw. He did not notice that the motion had lifted the right side of his coat and the precious letter to Blanco was protruding from its pocket. Once more he aimed, and then summoning all his strength for the fatal blow, he shot forward his arm, let go the knife and jumped back from the window.

Even as he jumped he heard the weapon strike and from the thick, dull sound he believed he had sent it straight home. Then he ran, with the sound of a cry from the cabin dinning in his ears. In an instant he was in his own room, with the door locked, and a moment later he had shuffled off his clothes and was in the berth with the blankets over his head.

Had he won, or lost? He could not tell. That cry disturbed him. If the knife had found the heart there would have been no sound, but that cry was clear and strong. Yet it had not been repeated, and there was no confusion about the ship. It had failed to attract attention. Perhaps it was only an unconscious death cry, and all was over. And quieted by that pleasant suggestion the assassin found at last the sleep that had so long refused to come.

But he had failed! Doubly so! For not only had the knife missed its mark but in drawing back from the window Rufino had dropped the letter to Blanco.

Blake, in fact, was practically uninjured. The heavy knife had struck just at his side, pinning his pajama coat to the mattress but hardly more than scratching his skin. The assassin had failed by at least four inches! The shock of the awakening had instinctively forced a cry from Blake, but instantly comprehending what had occurred he fell back once more upon his old plan of silence, and was relieved to find that that one shout had not aroused the ship. With his revolver in his hand he peered out of the window and found, as he had expected,

the deck deserted. The assassin had fled and there would be no immediate renewal of the attempt at murder. He drew up the shutters, clear to the top this time, and upbraiding himself for his folly in having left that small opening, he turned on the light and began to look himself over to see the extent of the damage.

But before he had looked at the scratch on his side he saw, lying on the carpet under the window, an envelope he had not placed there. He picked it up and read the address.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, softly. "To General Blanco, Havana. My assassin has lost his credentials!"

Without waiting to look at his wound he sat down on the berth and broke the seal of the letter. When he had finished reading it he glanced up and whistled very softly. Then he unfastened the belt around his body where he carried his own papers and money, and took it off. As he brought it into the light he noticed that a trickle of blood had touched it at one place. But before he looked at the cut from which the blood came he put that Blanco letter into the belt and carefully fastened it about himself again. Then he examined the wound, and laughed to see how trivial it was. His mind was full of the letter.

"Everything depends upon the momentary political and military success in Havana," he quoted. "Such, for instance, as the blowing up of an American battleship? 'Plans for the maintenance of Spanish integrity now under secret discussion by the chancel-

leries of Europe!' I wonder what Crane will say to that! Oh, I must get back! I can't trust this thing to the daylight in Cuba!"

Quickly Blake fished out of his traveling case a package of courtplaster and patched himself up. He was busy all the time conning over the events of the journey, the two attempts on his life, and the providential delivery into his hands of this amazing letter to Blanco.

"Camponero!" he said, to himself. "Oh, no! That old dullard never invented this devilishness! I am indebted to you, Viscount Ybarra, for this. God send a day when I can meet you to the full for it! Now I know what you were doing in Europe when you turned aside to follow me. Perhaps you thought I was on your track and wanted to see if I had learned anything. Perhaps you thought you had done your real work and would just follow me a while to see if you couldn't spoil mine. I don't know which, or care, now, for now I have you. Oh, I have you now, all right."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE COMING STORM

SUNRISE found the vessel nearing Havana, and soon afterward Blake went out on deck to watch the entrance of the harbor. He had not been there since his first cruise after leaving Annapolis. Already some of the other passengers were on the lookout. Blake scanned them curiously, wondering which, if any, of them, held Ybarra's commission on his life. But Rufino was not there! He was asleep in his berth as soundly as if crime had never soiled his hands any more than it had touched his conscience, and all unconscious of the failure of both his errands to the Cuban capital.

Caution came back to Blake with his near approach to Havana, and he chose a position on deck with some care, where no untoward "accident" in the way of falling tackle or flying missiles could befall him. He had learned from the captain of the ship the position of the wreck of the "Maine" and even before they had rounded the headland he was looking eagerly to make out the first sign of it.

It was a stirring picture that greeted them as the little ship drew near the harbor mouth. The fresh breeze crinkled the blue water and the waves laughed and leaped as if in play. The fishing boats and small cargo carriers were already standing out from

the harbor, their sails bellying before the wind, the white foam churning under their bluff bows. Over the old Morro and at the Cabañas fortress floated the red and gold banner of Spain, its broad stripes gleaming in the sunlight. And across the harbor lay the gray walls of the city, dotted with splashes of red where the tiled roofs loomed.

The little ship held steadily on her course, and presently was fairly under the guns of Cabañas. As she rounded the last turn Blake gazing ahead caught the flutter of the Stars and Stripes still floating from the wreck of the ruined battleship. Instantly his body straightened up to the stiff pose of "Attention!" and he saluted the flag, then reverently bared his head in memory of the countrymen who lay dead beneath its gleaming folds. Here and there an American among the passengers gathered on the forward deck saw the action and silently followed its example. And so the steamer held on to her anchorage.

It was not until the cable had been made fast to the buoy that Blake shifted his gaze from the wreck of the "Maine." Then, with a long sigh of emotion he turned to face the duty of the day. And as he turned his eyes fell upon another vessel lying beyond and outside of the wreck. From her staff floated the Stars and Stripes and at her truck hung the pennant of the New York Yacht Club. In a flash Blake recognized the black hull and rakish lines of the Butworth yacht.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, "what's the 'Isona' doing here, I wonder? Butworth down here?"

But there was no time for speculation, nor had Blake any inclination for it. The port officers were already aboard the ship, and in a few minutes Blake was in the launch puffing away to the Caballeria wharf.

For once on that eventful journey from Washington he was not under the watchful eyes of the agent of assassination. Rufino had slept the sleep of the untroubled just until he had been awakened by the rattle of the anchor chain banging through the hawse-pipe. He leaped up and threw on his clothes, and as he settled his coat over his shoulders he thrust one hand into the inside pocket feeling for that precious letter to Blanco. With a cry of dismay he found the pocket empty. At once began a terrified search of other pockets. The letter was not to be found. Then his meager luggage was overhauled, and then every nook and corner of the cabin. With trembling fingers he pushed and hauled and poked into holes. The letter was gone. He had lost it!

Half frantic at the discovery he rushed, on the impulse, to Blake's cabin. The door stood open and the room was empty. But in it Rufino saw no sign of anything unusual. He turned to the deck, and there, walking easily toward the companionway he saw the man he had tried twice to murder. The proof of his double failure was complete, and he turned with a snarl of rage back to his own room. There he leaned against the berth and cursed his luck. Then came the reaction, and

he laughed as he thought of the anger and disappointment of his employers in Washington. He pulled the wallet from his bosom, opened it with shaking fingers and took out the roll of money. Hastily he counted over the bills! Then he threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"That much, anyway!" he said. "It's more than I had in Washington!" And he stepped into the next launch and went ashore, to disappear from the staff and the ken of Diego and Ybarra.

The formalities at the Caballeria were quickly ended, and ten minutes after setting foot on shore Blake was driving up O'Reilly Street to the Inglaterra. For a time as the ship was coming into the harbor and his eyes were riveted on the flag over the wreck of the "Maine" the sense of strenuous urgency that had filled Blake upon his discovery of the Blanco letter had left him. But now it returned with increased force, and he sat on the edge of the carriage seat leaning forward, as if to hasten his arrival at the hotel. He was strangely excited, impressed with a subtle sense of anticipation, as if something of supreme importance were about to occur. From the moment when he had concluded the reading of the letter he had realized acutely the importance of its bearing upon the relations between the United States and Spain, and he felt the imperative necessity of getting it into the hands of Admiral Crunfield at the earliest possible moment. This was a thing the President should know without the least delay.

But he was in a somewhat peculiar situation. His orders gave him an independent position in Havana, but he was nevertheless in the presence of a superior officer, and although he would have no objection to Captain Mason knowing of his discovery and its importance, he hesitated about saying anything of it lest that officer should think he ought himself to take charge of the letter. Such a proposition Blake felt he ought to resist, not so much because of the personal element involved as on account of his conviction that the letter should go immediately and by thoroughly trustworthy messenger to Washington. He was unwilling to attempt to send it by cable, lest there should be some leak in transmission, and he even hesitated to make any reference to it in his dispatches, although he was provided with the navy code and a special cipher as well for private use with Admiral Crunfield. His immediate inclination was to cable the Admiral that material of paramount value had come unexpectedly into his possession and that he was returning personally with it at once. The nature of the work he had been sent to do in Havana was such that in all probability it could wait until he could come back again, and there was even a possibility that a consultation with Captain Mason would carry matters so far along that there would be no solid reason for his remaining in Cuba more than a day or two. But with the two attempts on his life fresh in his memory, and his uncertainty as to the identity and number of the assassins he could not avoid a question as to the advisability of

going back by the route over which he had come. And the direct ship to New York seemed to offer no special advantage.

With these perplexities revolving in his mind Blake stepped from his carriage at the Inglaterra. As he stopped at the office desk to register a tall, broad-shouldered man with a shining pate came up to ask for mail and Blake recognized Vallandingham Butworth.

"Hello! Mr. Butworth," he exclaimed, "when did you come down?"

"Why, how are you, Blake?" responded the banker. "I didn't know you were here."

"Just arrived," said Blake.

"So have I," returned Butworth. "Got in yesterday afternoon."

"I saw the 'Isona' in the harbor as we came in this morning," said Blake, "and wondered if you could be here. But I knew you were in Washington when I left."

"We are just going to breakfast," said the banker, "won't you join us? My niece came down with me, and there is quite a party altogether. Lady Edgethorpe, the Wyndhams, and Kropatchek. We are staying ashore so as to give them more time to see things."

That was news, indeed, to Blake, and his heart thumped at the prospect of seeing Helen again. Truly, fortune was not altogether against him on this journey that he had regretted having to make.

"Delighted, I'm sure," he said, eagerly. "If I

may go to my room a moment I shall be very glad to join you directly."

He leaped up the stone stairs behind the porter who had his bag, and in five minutes was entering the breakfast room, just as the Butworth party was exclaiming at the news the banker had brought them.

"Whom do you think I met at the desk just now?" Butworth had asked as he joined the party. And then before they had had time to guess he added, "Commander Blake! He has promised to breakfast with us."

"Hooray!" cried Percy Wyndham, the first to find his tongue.

A tell-tale flush spread over the face of Helen Lane, and with head bent over her plate she busied herself with her orange, while Lady Edgethorpe, with twinkling eyes, looked up at the banker and exclaimed, heartily:

"That *is* a pleasure, Mr. Butworth, the more for its being *so perfectly* unexpected."

A sharp glance at Helen accompanied the last words, and the girl recognized instantly the challenge in tone and accent. Her surprise had been complete, but she had recovered her composure now and added an apparently unconcerned, "Yes, indeed," to Lady Sarah's exclamation.

Roberta Wyndham had had her suspicions about Blake and Helen for some time, and she had not missed the flame signal on her friend's cheeks, but before she could utter the incisive comment that was framing itself upon her lips, Prince Kropatchek cut

in: "Iss it not? Such a great pleasure, Mr. Butworth. Ve shall have the benefit of experience as a guide now."

Mr. Butworth was giving directions to have an additional cover laid at their round table while the others talked, and as Kropatchek concluded Lady Edgethorne saw Blake coming toward them from the corridor.

"And here is Mr. Blake himself," she said, slyly watching Helen so as to be able to note any confirmatory signals in their greeting.

But Blake met the battery of eyes with the fortitude of a sailor, and not even the searching glances of Lady Edgethorne could detect anything beyond the conventional in either his bearing or that of the girl.

"I am unusually fortunate," was Blake's greeting, addressed noncommittally to the entire group. And then speaking directly to My Lady he added: "Lady Edgethorne, I didn't suppose you could be induced to leave Washington at this season? But I'm delighted that you were."

He found a chair beside Roberta Wyndham and amid a babble of exclamation and cross-questioning sat down to his breakfast. Then leaning slightly forward he addressed his first direct words to Helen. "I did not anticipate this pleasure," he said, "when I saw you last."

"Nor I," she replied, with composure, not disturbed by the consciousness that both Lady Sarah and Roberta Wyndham were alertly attentive to all

that was occurring. "When did you leave Washington?"

"Saturday night."

"Why, so did we," put in Mr. Butworth. "You must have stopped on the way."

"Yes, we stopped once very suddenly," replied Blake, and told the story of the wreck of his train. But of the attempts on his life he said nothing. Presently the talk shifted to Havana and the things to be seen there, and Blake had time to think of his own situation. Almost immediately after meeting the banker it had occurred to him that the presence of the yacht at Havana offered a possible solution of the greater part of his problem. He only waited a suitable opportunity to approach Mr. Butworth about it.

The party had settled their plans for the morning when Roberta Wyndham turned to Blake, who had pleaded imperative business as an excuse for not joining them, and said: "But you haven't told us why you are here."

The boldness of the attack was too much for the training of even so experienced a diplomat as Prince Kropatchek and he met Blake's amused smile with an expression of astonishment too great for words. Blake would have made some discursive reply but Lady Edgethorne was ahead of him with:

"That is one of those things no one can find out, I suppose; like the meaning of 'special duty' and 'sealed orders' and that sort of thing."

"Thank you, Lady Edgethorne," Blake said, smil-

ingly, "you have expressed it far better than I could. That is the advantage of diplomatic experience."

"Oh, call it business, Blake," put in Mr. Butworth, "that's what brought me down here, and it is time I was getting about it." He paused a moment, and then with sudden realization of the opportunity, added: "If you don't mind, I'll begin with a little talk with you."

"I was about to suggest that I should like to have a word with you," returned Blake, and then, as the ladies rose, the two men with polite excuses for absenting themselves, left the others to their own devices for the morning.

"Will you come to my room?" asked Mr. Butworth, leading the way, assured of compliance on Blake's part.

"We can talk there safely?" suggested Blake.

"As well as any place I can think of, unless we go back to the 'Isona.' I can risk it if you can."

"I have something to say to you that I do not care to have overheard," said Blake, in a low voice.

"And I to you," retorted the banker.

They were at his door as he spoke. He entered, and as Blake followed he saw that it was a spacious apartment with windows opening on a small balcony facing the Parque Central. The banker drew a couple of chairs in front of the window and sat down, remarking, as he blew a ring of smoke from his cigar:

"I don't think anybody can play eavesdropper here." And as if by way of demonstrating his own

confidence in their security he plunged at once into the midst of his affairs.

"What I want to know," he said, directly, "is what's going to happen, and how soon? Will it be war with us, or peace, and when? It means money to me, Mr. Blake, and by that I mean something more than carfare."

"I understand," replied Blake, dropping at once into the same directness of speech the banker had employed. "I do not as a rule discuss official matters except with my superior officers. You will understand, I am sure, how I mean that, Mr. Butworth."

"Of course," responded Butworth, with another ring of smoke.

"But the circumstances now are so unusual that I feel justified in saying that one of my purposes in coming here was to try to find the answer to your questions, or at least to one of them. And I think I am safe in saying, to *you*, Mr. Butworth,"—there was an unmistakably significant stress on the 'you'—"that whether there will be war or not depends upon just one thing."

"Yes, yes, I know. You mean, who did it—the 'Maine'?"

"Exactly. You probably have your suspicion as to the nationality of the man. I hope I am not going too far in saying that I have my suspicion as to his identity."

Blake paused and the banker nodded his head thoughtfully and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"And if you are right?" queried Butworth, at length.

"It means war."

"No avoiding it?" The banker's response was half a question and half a statement of fact.

"Hardly. Not because our government wants or will want it, but because it cannot prevent war if the people ever become convinced that a Spaniard blew up the 'Maine.'"

"How long will it take you, do you think?" The banker asked as if he were already calculating what could be accomplished in a matter of hours instead of days.

"That brings me to the question I wanted to ask you," replied Blake. "How soon do you think you can leave here?"

"Why?" Mr. Butworth's gaze was turned full on Blake's face.

Blake leaned forward until their two heads almost touched, and, in a whisper that hardly carried to the banker's attentive ear, replied: "Because I have already secured information of the utmost importance to our government which I desire urgently to carry personally to the Department at once. And I had considered asking you to place the 'Isona' at my disposal for that purpose. If you are to be here any length of time she could return for you after setting me up the coast. I have complete cause for believing that there is danger of this information being lost if I attempt to take it back the way I came."

"Ha!" exclaimed the banker. "You mean——"

"They are watching every move I make."

"Following you?"

"More. Two attempts have failed. I might not get off so well the third time."

"Not murder!" cried Butworth, half incredulously.

"Murder is only an incident of a desperate game like this, Mr. Butworth," said Blake. "It is not a matter I can discuss and you will appreciate that I am saying this only to you and not for repetition to anyone. I only say this much because you are entitled to know that I have a substantial reason for my action. I *am* extremely anxious to get my information into the hands of Admiral Crunfield with the very least delay that certainty of delivery will allow. That's why I ask for the 'Isona.' Your men can be trusted."

"That they can, Blake," returned the banker, heartily, "and by George, you shall have one of them with you every minute you are ashore here."

"Thank you for that," said Blake, warmly, "but I hardly think it is necessary, and besides, it would not be advisable anyway."

"How soon will you be ready to go?"

"In a few hours. I must see Captain Mason and the Consul-General, and then——"

"Then the 'Isona' will be ready."

"But yourself, Mr. Butworth, and Lady Edgethorne, and the others?"

"They will be ready also," exclaimed the banker,

with the emphasis of determination. "You have said enough to show me my course. I get from under by the shortest route, and am just as anxious to get back home now as you are."

He rose and moved toward the door of the apartment. "I have two or three men to see while you are making your visits," he went on, pulling out his watch as he spoke. "It is now half-past nine. Shall we meet here, say at one o'clock? Then, if you are ready to go, we will have luncheon on board as we pull out."

"I can hardly promise for a definite hour until I have seen Captain Mason. But I hope to be ready by afternoon."

"Very well, I could use a little more time myself. Suppose we say four o'clock. My launch will wait for you at the Machina wharf."

With that understanding they parted, and Blake was soon engaged in earnest conversation with Captain Mason, hearing the details of what had been accomplished already in the investigation of the battleship explosion. It took Blake but a few minutes to see that his fellow-officer was taking the very line of investigation which he had come to direct, and that already substantial progress had been made. They had a long talk, for there was much for Mason to tell. Then the Consul-General came in and the three discussed the situation over their luncheon. It all tended to confirm Blake in his decision to return immediately, and when the time came he was quite ready to embark. He had cabled Admiral Crun-

field that he was returning at once with important material.

The banker had been pacing restlessly up and down the corridor of the hotel for a quarter of an hour when the three ladies came in, followed by the angular Kropatchek and Percy Wyndham.

"We've had a bully time, Mr. Butworth," cried the effervescent youth, "just been driving around and picking out the things we want to see later."

"I am afraid you will be disappointed, then," replied the banker, soberly. "I find that I must return to Washington at once, and have ordered Captain Polk to be ready to sail this afternoon."

"Going right back!" the three ladies exclaimed in chorus, while the big eyes of Prince Kropatchek blinked violently behind his glasses, and Percy Wyndham stood in open-mouthed but speechless astonishment.

"Why, what is the matter, Uncle Val?" queried Helen.

"It is most important and urgent business, my dear," stated the banker. "I have had news that imperatively demands my immediate return. We'll have luncheon here and then go aboard." Then as if it were an unimportant afterthought he added: "Commander Blake is going back with us."

At that there was another chorus of exclamations, this time rather of pleasure than dismay. But Lady Edgethorpe's bright eyes caught the wondering glance of Prince Kropatchek for just an instant, and

diplomat telegraphed to diplomat a rapid range of questions in the fleeting exchange.

As they drove down to the wharf it fell to Prince Kropatchek, despite obvious preference for another place, to sit beside Lady Edgethorne. That enterprising diplomat lost no time in training her probe upon his puzzled mind.

"It's the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of," she declared, downrightly.

"Ah, iss it not? I have never in my whole life experienced such a *déroute*. So amazing, these Americans! Ve are just here. Ve come direct from Washington by the steamboat. Ve find Mr. Blake who has come directly from Washington. Mr. Butworth talks a little with him,—and *voilà*—the finish. Ve go back to Washington like the racehorse, iss it not? Eh? Amazing!"

But Lady Edgethorne saw clearly what apparently Kropatchek had not yet realized, that Mr. Butworth had received information of the utmost importance that morning. Obviously it must have come from Blake, but surely Blake had not come to Havana to give it to Butworth. Her eager curiosity was enormously whetted, so much so that for the time she quite forgot the deliciously romantic part of the experience that sent Blake back home on the same ship with Helen. She felt that they were observing the making of history, if only they could read. But it was history written in a code to which she had no key, and try as she might she could find no clew.

The launch was waiting at the Machina, but Blake

was not there. Butworth looked at his watch and saw it was not yet four o'clock. "We'll go aboard," he said, "and send the launch back for Blake. He was to come a little later."

Captain Polk had obeyed his orders to the letter and the "Isona" was ready to sail at a moment's notice. It was just four o'clock when he saw the launch put out from the wharf with its passenger. A few moments later Blake was on deck and almost before the launch was out of the water the "Isona" was under way.

Three days later, toward the close of a gray afternoon, Blake stood with Helen Lane at the taffrail watching the whirling wake of the yacht as they steamed in by the Virginia capes. With a delicacy gratefully realized by the troubled girl he had refrained from speaking of his feeling for her throughout the voyage, although it had cost him many a hard struggle with himself. The lowering sky and rising wind told the girl what the falling barometer had already announced to the sailor. As they stood silently gazing at the sea there surged over Blake anew the realization of the cataclysm that was brooding over the political horizon.

"It is going to storm," said the girl, at length.

"Yes," he replied, gravely, "but not now. There may be a flurry in the weather now, but the real storm will come later."

She looked up at him with quick comprehension. "You mean the war? Is it so certain, then?"

"Certain," he said, "and soon." Then with

abrupt irrelevancy: " Shall we walk a little before it gets too rough? "

She took his arm, for already the yacht was beginning to respond to the sullen heave and toss of the swelling seas, and together they tramped back and forth on the deck. Day died slowly out of the angry sky; it grew dark, and the lights came up. They saw the wheeling flash that marked the entrance to the bay and paused a while to watch it. Then she turned to go below. At the door of the companionway he stopped.

" I have had three days," he said, slowly. " No matter what comes now it can't rob me of them."

CHAPTER XXV

AN INDEPENDENT COMMAND

WHEN they reached Washington the next afternoon Blake parted with the others at the station and drove immediately to the Navy Department. He had reported by telegraph from Norfolk to Admiral Crunfield, whom he found in his office eagerly waiting for the young man's arrival. The old sailor's confidence in Blake was such that after that cable from Havana he was prepared to receive any sort of extraordinary announcement. He had conjured up an amazing line of possible reasons for the sudden change in Blake's plans, but not one of them had touched the real cause. Consequently, despite his preparation, it was with an exclamation of surprise that he received the Blanco letter when Blake laid it before him. The young man wasted no time in circumlocution. The moment the door closed behind him and they were alone in the Admiral's office he said:

"I reported from Havana that I was returning with important material. Here it is."

Admiral Crunfield was not as fluent in Spanish as the younger man, but the address on the envelope was sufficient to give him an inkling of what was coming. He puzzled over Ybarra's florid penmanship a long time, while Blake stood, with folded

arms, silently looking on. At length the reading was concluded and Admiral Crunfield leaned back in his chair and faced Blake. The official mask was on his face and there was not a sign in his expression to show the excitement he felt.

"How did you get that letter?" he asked, and one unfamiliar with him who heard would have said he was discrediting his informant.

"It was dropped in my cabin on the Miami steamer by the man who was trying to kill me."

The reply fairly startled the old Admiral out of his official composure.

"What?" he exclaimed, "trying to kill you?"

"Yes, sir. It was the second attempt."

"The second?" Admiral Crunfield was so astonished that he could only repeat Blake's words. He jumped up and paced rapidly about the room.

"The first was made on the train the night I left Washington, just before the wreck."

"But you were not hurt?"

"No, sir! I had the luck to escape both times with nothing more than a scratch."

Admiral Crunfield had regained his grip on himself and resumed his seat.

"Who did it?" he asked, with his old manner almost entirely restored.

"I don't know," replied Blake. "I had no chance to identify the man either time. The first time I saw only a dark shadow in my berth on the train. The next time I was awakened by the blow of a knife across my side. Evidently it was thrown by

a man who put his arm inside the window of my cabin and dropped the letter out of his pocket in getting back after he had thrown. When I jumped up and looked out no one was in sight, but this letter was on the floor. As soon as I read the letter I saw that I ought to get back here with it at the first possible moment. When we reached Havana that morning I found Mr. Butworth there, with his yacht. He asked what I thought of the situation and I said I believed there would be war; that I had information of the utmost importance which there was danger of losing if I returned by the same route over which I had gone down, and I assumed the responsibility of asking him to cut short his stay in Havana and bring me back at once. He accepted my statement without asking further details and we sailed that afternoon."

"You saw Mason?"

"I did, sir, and am prepared to report at length for him. I also saw the Consul-General. I was satisfied that Captain Mason was pursuing the very line you had instructed me to take, and so told him what my instructions were. My belief was that the most important thing for me to do was to get back with this letter."

Admiral Crunfield had sat staring unwinkingly at Blake throughout the report. Now he leaped to his feet again and smote his desk a resounding thump with his clenched fist.

"Blake," he said, "you are the first man I have ever known in the navy who dared to disregard the

direct orders of the President. But, by God, you're right! Come with me to the White House!"

In two minutes they were in the President's office and Admiral Crunfield was saying: "Mr. President, here is Lieutenant-Commander Blake back with matter which I deemed it important for you to know at once."

The suppressed excitement of the Admiral warned the President that the news was really of great significance, and he rose from his desk and led the way to the cabinet room. There Blake went again over the story of his perilous trip to Havana and the fortuitous securing of the Blanco letter. And when he read the letter even the calm composure of the President, who had sat apparently unmoved by the stirring recital, was shaken.

"You have performed a very valuable service, Mr. Blake," he said, "and I shall not forget it."

As Blake bowed his thanks, the President stepped to the door and spoke to his secretary: "Ask Mr. Crane to come over at once," he said. Then turning again to Blake: "I will ask you to write out for me your translation of the letter."

Blake sat down at the cabinet table and began to write, while the President in his low, even voice discussed the affair with Crunfield. In a few moments the head of the State Department was ushered into the room, and immediately the President began telling Blake's story. The imperturbable statesman heard it through without a word of comment, but when Blake, at the President's direction, had read

the letter again, there was a flush upon the cheeks of the Secretary, and he betrayed the fact that even he could feel excitement.

"Amazing!" he exclaimed. "What inconceivable impudence!"

The ebullient Crunfield made no further attempt at restraint. "It is time to strike, Mr. President," he ejaculated. "They are preparing a coalition against us, and we must deliver the first blow!"

"I am afraid Admiral Crunfield has correctly stated the situation, Mr. President," said the Secretary of State, deliberately. "I am, as you know, extremely reluctant to admit the necessity of war. I share to the full your own hatred of such measures. But in the light of the information we have been receiving from Europe since last fall certain phrases of this letter seem to afford incontestable proof, and I must concur in the Admiral's judgment, that when a struggle becomes inevitable it is of advantage to deliver the first blow."

The President made no reply and for a few moments the silence in the room was broken only by the scratching of Blake's pen as he finished the translation of the letter. Then the President spoke.

"What folly it all is!" he exclaimed, "and what a pity! How useless, yet how inescapable! Still," he turned directly to the Secretary of State, "we must not act precipitately. Our negotiations have not yet reached an *impasse*. Until they do there is always hope, however small. Of course this new information decreases that hope, but does it quite de-

stroy it? We must wait and see. Meantime, we must use our utmost endeavors to make the negotiations succeed."

He picked up the Blanco letter and examined it curiously for a few moments, in silence. Then he passed it to the Secretary, saying: "I think you had better keep that with your personal private papers, and permit no one to see it. We four are the only ones who know it. Mr. Blake has made a translation which I will keep. Let him make one also for you if you desire it. Then let us go to work to see if we cannot avoid its apparently inevitable consequences."

The President rose as he finished speaking, and the others prepared to leave.

"Let me thank you again, Mr. Blake," said the President, warmly pressing the young man's hand. "Crane, I will see you in the morning, after we have slept on this."

They were moving out when the President called Admiral Crunfield back to him.

"What are you going to do with Blake?" he asked.

"I had thought of sending him to Admiral Dowling as chief of staff."

"Don't you think you better give him an independent command, if you can? There are too few men like him in the navy. We need them all."

Admiral Crunfield bowed, and turned away.

CHAPTER XXVI

ENTANGLEMENTS

"DANCING becomes tiresome after a while, at least I find it so. Do not you, Prince?" said Roberta Wyndham, fanning herself languidly, as Prince Kropatchek, resplendent in the sky blue of the Imperial Dragoons, conducted her gallantly from the ballroom into the spacious hall adjoining.

"Ah, not tiresome to me. It cannot be tiresome for the cavalier to dance with the Queen of the Elfs," replied the Prince, intensely, a flash of genuine admiration in his eyes.

"Please don't! You are polite to a fault, but——"

She sighed faintly without looking at him; her eyes wandered restlessly around, as on a quest for some elusive object.

"But it *is* so true; I can never help myself to speak the truth," insisted Kropatchek, with grotesque earnestness.

"Since when are diplomats supposed to be worshippers at the shrine of the veiled goddess?" asked Roberta, smiling absent-mindedly, yet somehow strangely stirred by his evident endeavor to be convincing.

Soft strains of music wafted from the beautifully appointed ballroom of the Spanish embassy, where

behind a gorgeous screen of living plants and artistically interwoven smilax vines, a string orchestra played dainty Andalusian airs adapted to waltzes and other measures involved in the intricate figures of the cotillon. Sylph-like apparitions in fluffy Paris creations, men in trim uniforms, others clad in the sober clawhammer, but all much beribboned, or bedecked with gaudy tinsel favors and gayly-colored silken sashes, swaying gracefully to fairy rhythms. Old dowagers on tiny gilt chairs garnishing the walls engaged in tart tattle glossed over with honeyed smiles; or prattling conventional mean-nothing phrases.

Roberta glanced back into the ballroom, her face betraying disappointment. Then to the Prince: "This perfumed atmosphere is stifling. It wears me out. I *hate* it!"

"If you always look so when you hate a thing, I would wish you always hate something, it makes you so sublimely *enchantant*," crackled the Prince, his countenance beaming. "Will you favor me with the permission to seek you a place where the atmosphere presents a feature more tranquil?"

Bending toward her he pointed with angular movement to one of the drawing-rooms which had been transformed into a winter garden, studded with turret-like recesses almost concealed by nodding palms.

The valiant dragoon had now fully determined to storm the fortress, and he was not willing to forego this opportunity offered by the fickle goddess of

chance. He purposed to bring heavy artillery to bear on the works. With such aim in view he had most skilfully reconnoitered all evening, and he believed that the propitious time for a direct attack had now arrived.

True, a decisive effect of his strategical measures was not immediately apparent, but, on the other hand, his efforts to lay siege to the heart of this beautiful girl had not been discouraged, and he told himself that great prizes are not often won by a *coup de main*, but far more frequently by a persistent siege, continued well-aimed fire, and circumspect patience. And Prince Kropatchek, though somewhat slow, was both patient and systematic, and thus he might eventually hope to batter down the formidable walls of defense.

Roberta, too much occupied with her own thoughts, had scarcely paid more than passing heed to the unusual directness of the Prince's maneuvers, and followed his guidance quite mechanically. Suddenly her features became animated. A delicate pink flushed her cheeks, her eyes scintillated. Her strenuous watchfulness had been rewarded in an unexpected manner. For at that moment a fleeting vision glided past at a distance: she observed Viscount Ybarra and Helen Lane crossing the other end of the spacious hall, Ybarra displaying a devotional attention which caused Roberta's heart to throb spasmodically. For an instant only Roberta saw the pair as they walked in the direction of the conservatory, but that instant revealed enough to her; she needed

no lengthy explanation. The Viscount's expressive black eyes riveted on Helen's lovely but indifferently polite, proud face! That ravishing smile with which Ybarra regarded her! How well she knew that smile! How she despised it now when it was lavished on another!

"Outrageous!" she whispered, intensely.

Prince Kropatchek, who had cheerfully rattled on in blissful ignorance of the disturbance clouding Roberta's thoughts, piling profusest compliments on compliments in his quaint way, stared perfectly aghast at this amazing retort to the outpourings of his tender sentiments. He had never realized for a moment that his laboriously phrased conversational efforts had absolutely failed to reach Roberta's inner consciousness, and he was simply dumfounded.

"Ah,—I had not the intention to inflict myself——" he stammered in utter embarrassment. "Ah, Miss Wyndham,—to enrage your amiable sentiments,—I meant—that is, I did not mean—I—permit me to assure you,—I could not——" he floundered helplessly, getting his thoughts and his language tangled up more and more every second.

Coloring furiously, Roberta turned to her escort, but succeeded in masking her own embarrassment with an adept manipulation of the fan. She realized instantaneously that she had inexcusably lost control of herself, but splendidly trained in the utilization of all the resources of social tactics, she regained her composure at once. An echo of his tender words reawakened in her, and, playing innocently with her

fan, she looked with bold deceit into his anxious face to cover her retreat.

"You?" she smiled, pleasantly. "Why, Prince, you are a most perfect cavalier. I was vexed at this stupid chain," holding up for his inspection this guiltless sample of the goldsmith's art, tangled into a most amazing knot. "You see?—The chain——?"

"The chain——?" gasped Prince Kropatchek, blinking at the *corpus delicti* with such a puzzled expression that Roberta had to restrain a violent desire to burst out laughing.

"Yes,—don't you see, Prince? It is fearfully tangled. I despair of ever getting it straightened out again. My temper is so easily ruffled,—you should be patient with me," she added, inconsequentially.

"Vill you permit me——?" The Prince held out his hand, still visibly confused.

"No, thank you," came the quick reply simultaneously with the withdrawal of the chain from public view. But Roberta added, with a warm tinge in her voice: "Really, Prince, you have no idea how grateful I am to you."

"Grateful?—To me——?" A burst of radiant happiness came over the Prince's features. That plaintive touch of tragedy which a minute before had made him appear a hopeless victim of discomfiture and despair was instantly dispelled by her graceful words.

"It iss so very pleasant to hear you say that," he murmured, blinking fervently through his gold-

rimmed glasses, the head bent gallantly over her well-shaped hand for a brief moment, as if he would breathe upon it the kiss of homage which betokens the vassal's undying loyalty to the First Lady of the Realm.

A silvery ripple of laughter.

"Pleasant to have a nasty temper? You may be proud of an exceedingly accommodating taste in tempers, Prince Kropatchek."

The Prince looked with odd seriousness at Roberta.

"It is very accommodating itself to the ideal situation when it is sweetness flavored with a *soupçon de sévérité*.—As the ancient poet says, you remember: '*Delirant reges plectuntur Achivi?*'—Hahaha," he added, with a chuckle which seemed to vibrate through his entire anatomy.

"No," laughed Roberta, "I don't remember anything of the kind. Do you believe we girls have time to study ancient poets at boarding schools? You had better present that imposing quotation to me in classic English so that I can appreciate it."

The Prince bowed gallantly: "When the adorable queen deigns to be displeased, the true vassal bows in disconsolate admiration," he replied.

"Oh, the queen is much obliged to you," returned Roberta, with affected superciliousness, "but doesn't it take a great many English words to translate a very brief Latin sentence?"

Yet she did not seem at all disappointed with the

ardent devotion implied in his translation, despite its lengthiness.

They were slowly walking toward one of the turret-like recesses, a sequestered nook half-hidden by palms and potted plants, the very place most aptly designed for an exchange of precious confidences. Bending back the overhanging fan-shaped leaves of a huge palm the Prince pointed gracefully to the swelling divan: "The ideal place for taking the rest, if it is the pleasure of Miss Wyndham to listen for the more complete explanation of the ancient poets?" This with a sly twinkle under his gold-rimmed glasses.

"At the peril that the queen become still more displeased, Prince?" said Roberta, archly.

A sweep of the angular elbow and the Prince placed his hand on his heart: "I would be possessed of the greatest misfortune, if I displeased myself more to you than before, but I don't fear it now, Hahaha," he crackled, bubbling over with happiness as they entered the cozy bower.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE INNER CIRCLE WEAKENS

THE tall, slim figure of Don Pio de Camponero emerged from the hall accompanied by his *précieux* French colleague, M. de St. Pierre, the two being deeply engrossed in conversation.

"As I perceive, everything seems to run smoothly," St. Pierre was saying in an undertone, "*tout à fait* we have made very commendable progress."

"It could not be otherwise," declared Don Pio, with a great show of self-satisfaction. "The pressure which we have caused to be exerted was bound to make itself felt. Contrary personal opinions are apt to give way to instructions from high places. But quite right, the affair has been handled skilfully,—ah, indeed, quite skilfully."

They halted in front of a life-size oil painting representing Her Majesty, the Queen Regent, poised on an elaborate gilt easel, and Don Pio adjusted the monocle under his right eyebrow, as though he was preparing to discuss the great artistic merit of the royal portrait. But out of the corner of his eye he surveyed his French colleague with amiable condescension.

"*Une espièglerie bien réussie*, to mold our English friend into the leading rôle," ventured St. Pierre, pursing his lips as though he was contemplating a

tempting delicacy placed before him. "The cards were excellently shuffled at the *Ballplatz*."

"*Un coup de guerre*," corrected Don Pio, gravely, with the mien of a schoolmaster who reproves a refractory pupil, "not shuffled at Vienna at all,—merely dealt from the pack as it was handed over from Madrid,—and, ahem, the suggestion was engineered,"—flicking imaginary particles of dust from his immaculate evening dress adorned with two gorgeous stars in diamonds and emeralds—"from *here*." Saying as much as "Behold the very author right in front of you, my dear St. Pierre, if you please."

"Undoubtedly, undoubtedly," St. Pierre hastened to assure his distinguished associate, "*mes félicitations les plus sincères*," at the same time giving his hand an impressive little jerk sideward by way of accentuating his profound admiration for the achievements of a masterful mind. "And the result is a great comedy," he added, "a great comedy, as piquant as an extravaganza in the *Folies Bergères*,—with our dear Lord Florian as *Prima Ballerina*."

The distinguished representative of the French Republic suppressed a well-bred titter, discreetly pressing his white silken handkerchief to his lips.

"A-ah," said Don Pio, much interested.

"I surmise," continued St. Pierre, "he believed that we all were ignorant of the real succession of circumstances when he acted as though he were proceeding entirely on his own initiative, but of course to those who knew, the play was transparent, and I barely suspect that even Edelsheim knew, for as a

rule he is only too well informed about affairs concerning Austrian policies."

"The conference took place this afternoon, as you indicated in your note?" inquired Don Pio.

"Quite so. Full attendance. Even that absurd Russian was there. Rugby took the initiative and kept constantly to the front, Apponyi absolutely inactive, but sometimes expressing his consent with reserve. I presume he and Lord Florian had rehearsed the programme before the meeting, and both followed the instructions they respectively had received to the very letter. Apponyi superintended the proceedings in the rôle of impartial but benevolent and interested listener. Not once did he obtrude any decided views of his own, but simply watched poor old Rugby like a lynx. And Edelsheim observed them both in turn. Extremely amusing situation, but, *à la bonneheure*, Rugby played his part well. He never gave the slightest indication that his task was distasteful to him,—*à merveille*, he is well trained." The French diplomat indulged in a low-voiced, derisive titter. "I assure you, *cher ami*, no one not fully informed about the situation could have suspected that Lord Florian was the marionette and Apponyi manipulating the wires. But I shall not be at all surprised if Rugby had taken occasion to acquaint his dear friend Secretary Crane with the general plan and much of the detail, though in all probability he has not said anything about the Emperor's suggestion to the Queen. The State Department, quite likely, knows by this time what action

is proposed. I sent you the text of the identical note, as practically agreed upon. You received it?"

"I have the note, I am obliged to you," replied Don Pio, with an indifferent nod, "but it is not as strong as I would have wished."

"That was all we could achieve in the line of compromise, as Edelsheim positively declined to sign anything in the nature of a direct protest," said St. Pierre, with a shrug.

"The arrangements for the presentation of the note have been made?" queried the Spaniard.

"We are expected to meet with Rugby to-morrow afternoon for that purpose. I believe he has communicated with Crane, advising him informally that we expect to go to the White House."

Don Pio mused for a moment. "There is no longer any question as to Russia's adherence to the note?" he asked.

"Not as regards the present note. Yet I doubt whether this infantile Chargé, who never seems to have any authority, and fails to secure instructions on the simplest propositions, can go any further. How absurd, to have a Chargé at a time when most delicate relations must be reckoned with," remarked St. Pierre, with evident disgust.

"Ah!" Don Pio stiffened up. "It is not proposed to halt after this initial step?" He raised his eyebrows so precipitately that the monocle dropped, but he caught it deftly half way and restored it with a dignified flourish to its former ornamental position. "My dear St. Pierre," he said, coldly, "this note

must inevitably be followed up by more forceful representations."

"We shall have to await the results of this first step," answered the Frenchman, cautiously, "a satisfactory effect may be produced,—if not——"

"There can be no 'if' or 'if not'!" Don Pio's arrogant tone indicated deep annoyance. "A firm policy must be pursued, unerringly, without deviation."

"Still, you cannot drive Ambassadors like a herd of sheep," interposed St. Pierre, rather nettled at the tone of sovereign dictation assumed by his colleague.

"A-ah," said Don Pio, "it needs but a proper bellwether, *mon cher ami*,—the herd will follow!"

The French diplomat slightly wrinkled his nose and sniffed. Possibly he did not altogether appreciate the rural simile Don Pio had chosen for an illustration.

"The inner circle may hold together," he explained, "it probably will,—Rugby included. But Edelsheim has played an ambiguous game from the start, and no more can that Russian imbecile be relied on for future moves. That is the extent of this 'Concert.'" The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"The combination of France, Italy, Austria, and England is strong enough to force acquiescence from the others," declared Don Pio, airily, "provided there is no weakening in this inner circle——?" focussing his monocle on St. Pierre.

Then, noise of conversation and laughter close by, and footsteps approaching, Don Pio interrupted the run of his observations.

"Ah, — some persons — *certainement*" — ogling about him—"that odious gossip of an English-woman—and somebody"—casting a disgusted glance at a couple just entering the drawing-room—"we had better chose more private surroundings."

St. Pierre glanced adroitly over his shoulder, and perceived Lady Sarah Edgethorpe, escorted by a gentleman, or rather as it would appear, escorting him. Then the distinguished Frenchman waved his hand ostentatiously toward Her Spanish Majesty's portrait, which had been the silent Third in this important ambassadorial conference, and drawled half-loud:

"Magnificent work of art, indeed, *cher ami*,—a precious treasure,—mag-*ni*-ficent——"

And the two great diplomatists moved slowly out of sight with measured steps, without bestowing any attention whatsoever on the insignificant, preposterously presumptuous mortals who had dared to incommode these mighty statesmen by their untimely approach.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FROM THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

"I AM ready to listen to thrilling confidences, Mr. Blake," said Lady Sarah, breezily, to her companion. "You need not hesitate—the ancient owls whom we surprised in one of their wonderful midnight whisperings"—a fleeting glance toward the retreating ambassadors—"have taken flight and we shall be quite undisturbed. Tell me, why does a gallant warrior like Commander Stewart Blake stand with a miles-away-look in his eyes in a corner of a ballroom, nestling against a door-post like a frost-bitten vine, evidently bent on mooning all by his lonely self?" She laughed, mockingly. "I felt I had to rescue you from your gloomy solitude. Come now, these grave charges require an explanation!" tapping his arm playfully with her fan.

Clever, observant, ever on the alert, My Lady's well-trained eyes had chanced upon a shrewd discovery over yonder in the ballroom. Commander Blake squeezed into a corner all by himself, mustering with morose intent the kaleidoscopic succession of swaying couples as they passed him in the figures of the cotillon had arrested her attention.

Blake had stood there looking intensely bored, as if realizing that he did not belong there, and wishing he were a thousand miles away. For personal rea-

sons, he had come but reluctantly to the function at the Spanish embassy. But Admiral Crunfield, to whom he had spoken about his invitation to the ball, had decided that he must go to avoid arousing unnecessary suspicion in Ybarra's mind. And subordinating his personal feelings to the exigencies of the public service he had gone. The Viscount Ybarra had noticed him first in that lonely corner. Unobserved by Blake he had halted, a lurid flash of suppressed rage in his eyes. An impulsive desire seemed to urge him on toward the object of his hatred, but recollecting himself, he had hurried on through the maze of dancing couples, inwardly cursing Diego for his imbecile failure to dispose of Blake, as, indeed, more than once since learning of the naval officer's safe return to Washington, he had flayed the old servant, face to face, with scathing words, until Diego, shaking with fright, craved mercy on his bended knees.

Now, Lady Sarah was quite interested when she discovered Commander Blake in that same corner. Excusably, perhaps, for she affected no dislike for men with strong attractive faces, well-proportioned figures, and the *allures* of good breeding, and Stewart Blake certainly could claim all these attributes. First, Lady Sarah regarded him with idle, impersonal interest like a pleasing coincidence in this aggregation of very indifferent social commonplace. But then, suddenly, an unmistakable expression of dismay flitting over his face aroused her inquisitive nature. She observed a momentary deepening of the lines,

which lent a forbidding almost fierce aspect to his strong features. Searching for the cause, she detected, with the precision of the expert, that his eager glances followed the fleeting forms of Viscount Ybarra and Helen Lane.

"Indeed," she smiled to herself, "this is delightful!" And at once My Lady determined to put Stewart Blake gently on the rack. For her own present diversion and—well, it is always so nice to know things which other people strive to conceal from you—

Lady Sarah lost no time in carrying out her decision. A scant few minutes had elapsed when she had gracefully swooped down on her prey and carried the unsuspecting victim away with her into more secluded environments.

Blake, who for these few minutes had experienced a sensation not unlike a big yawl towed by a puffing little naphtha launch over rolling billows, could not help smiling.

"Your description of my modest person does honor to your picturesque imagination, Lady Edgethorpe," he replied to her rigid questioning. "I was not aware that I afforded such a fit opportunity for the exercise of your 'first-aid-to-the-wounded' proclivities?"

"You see, I have gone in for charity this winter," retorted Lady Sarah, with a coquettish sigh, "it is such a relief from my other social duties, I assure you. Though really, just now I require sympathy for my own self. I am quite lost, Mr. Blake;

Trummy deserted me most shamefully. He is so clever, evanescent quietly when he longs for a cigar——”

Then, swiftly changing her point of attack: “How tasteful these decorations are,” she said, irrelevantly, glancing about her. “I understand Ybarra always attends to these matters personally, and gives the minutest directions. Isn’t he a marvel?”

Stewart Blake winced imperceptibly at the mention of the name. With studied unconcern he surveyed the display of palms and flowering clusters scattered profusely, and apparently without design, about the large drawing-room, but did not reply.

A delicate smile of satisfaction, tinged with the subtlest infusion of malice, played on My Lady’s daintily curved lips. She perceived that her sharp little arrow had hit the mark.

But while that first thrust had produced some effect, her incipient diagnosis needed more definite confirmation. Therefore she pursued the lead with charming nonchalance.

“Such a personal application to details is so unusual for a man like Ybarra, don’t you think, Mr. Blake?”

Commander Blake’s brow wrinkled slightly. The subject so persistently pursued by Lady Edgethorpe did not at all appeal to him. But his fair tormentor, apparently in blissful ignorance that she was causing him any uneasiness, proceeded to deliver another thrust.

“And look, how thoughtful,” she exclaimed, “to

select Golden Gate roses as the principal feature of decoration. You see? Here on the mantel a perfect bank of them, and over there in those big Japanese vases! Perfectly lovely of Ybarra to pay her this pretty compliment. You know, Golden Gate roses are her favorites?"

"Her's?" Blake looked inquiringly at Lady Sarah.

"Why, Helen's, of course."

"Helen—Miss Lane?" For an instant he was taken off his guard. "What has Miss Lane to do with the decorations?"

Inwardly triumphant, Lady Sarah feigned polite astonishment, as though she pitied him for his ignorance.

"Viscount Ybarra is so charmingly devoted to her," she said, in a confidential whisper.

"Devoted?—To Miss Lane?" he blurted out, but checked himself instantly. Then, with all the calmness he could muster: "A society secret, I suppose, eagerly commented on by Miss Lane's 'dearest friends'?"

"Perhaps no more than that," Lady Sarah replied, nonchalantly, "but I have an idea, don't you know, that this whole affair to-night was actually arranged for her? So odd, to give a midwinter function on *Mi Careme!* Would it not seem so to you? What puzzles me is, how he managed to prevail on the dear old Ambassador to acquiesce in such an outlandish proposition. M. de Camponero is always so distinctly *à cheval sur l'étiquette.*" The last words

a whimsical drawl in mockery of Don Pio's pretentious punctiliousness.

Stewart Blake was barely able to conceal his wrought up feelings. "Lady Edgethorne," he said, severely, "all this is indeed very entertaining gossip about a young lady who does not appear to court popular solicitude."

"How coldly you treat this romantic affair," complained Lady Edgethorne, with the air of benign superiority and the loveliest of smiles. "But, of course, you serious-minded people who never bestow your weighty thoughts on anything less than grave questions of battleship evolutions and triple expansion engines and rapid-firing guns, can scarcely be expected to indulge in human trivialities which seem of surpassing importance to the untutored feminine mind. Besides, I dare say, you are so intensely American that you have no sympathy with international marriages. Am I right?"

"Good heavens," whispered Blake, half-loud to himself, "has it gone that far?"

He stared rigidly into vacancy, like a person hypnotized, and became immersed in thoughts which carried him so far beyond the pale of his surroundings that momentarily the ball, the heavily perfumed air, the distant strains of music, and the gay murmur of voices, even the more tangible presence of Lady Edgethorne, had quite passed out of his mind. Just that one idea obsessed him: Helen's impending marriage! There could be no longer any doubt about it; they discussed it in garrulous society circles as a mat-

ter of course. The hated Spaniard had forced his will upon her after all. "She will marry that slimy rascal——" he murmured under his breath.

"Beg your pardon, Mr. Blake?" Lady Sarah's voice had a strange, faraway sound, as floating in on the air from remotest distances.

Blake seemed to hear that voice, but could not realize its actuality. A sort of vague feeling that his real self had gone from him crept dimly over his consciousness, and his mind wondered in a half-numbed way.

"Mr. Blake, you are positively inattentive," said Lady Sarah, roguishly, giving his hand a light tap with her fan. "Is the question of international marriages one of such deep importance that it throws you into a trance?"

The young officer came out of his reveries with a start. There was a perceptible vibration in his tone when he replied, with an attempt at jocularly: "The battleships, Lady Edgethorpe, and the triple expansion engines and all that sort of thing, you know." But growing serious, he added almost solemnly: "To be truthful, Lady Edgethorpe, my thoughts had wandered carelessly to Havana. A queer association of ideas, you will say. Possibly, not quite so odd as it might seem." He looked away from her for a moment. Then turning toward her with a polite bend of the head: "I hope you will accept my apology for this seeming rudeness——"

Lady Sarah laid a daintily gloved hand on his arm

and raised her fan with the other, an enigmatic smile playing about her lips.

"Let me tell you a story, Commander Blake."

He bowed silently and she began: "Once upon a time there was a beautiful Princess who, being an orphan, lived quite solitary and alone in an ancient tower, with an old servant and his wife as her sole protectors. In a neighboring castle dwelt a horrid Ogre, who for many a day had cast longing glances upon the lovely Princess in the tower, and devised all sorts of devilish snares to obtain the fulfillment of his desires. He approached the old servants with lurid promises of treasure and exalted position in his kingdom, if they would gain him access to the lovely Princess so he might woo her. He succeeded in dazzling the servants' worldly minds, and they catered to his will. The Ogre came into the tower day for day and so wearied the Princess with his protestations of love that she was about ready to accept his suit, when one fine summer day as the Princess sat at the window of the tower in deep distress, a gallant young Knight astride a prancing charger rode valiantly up to the portcullis and——"

My Lady paused and looked teasingly into her companion's face.

"Yes, but the point of the story?" asked Blake, with lively curiosity.

"Why, I feel quite exhausted by this tremendous effort, Commander," she laughed, tantalizingly, "and I must rest a little, if I am to finish this fairy tale."

With an eager wave of the hand Blake invited her

into a tempting nook close by, a turret-like recess, almost hidden by broad-leaved palms.

Lady Sarah nodded gracious consent, and Blake took a step forward, intent upon facilitating her entrance by the removal of the overhanging leaves, when quite unexpectedly a tall form in sky blue arose toweringly from the depths of the cozy bower, gold-rimmed glasses blinking through the verdure.

One glimpse of the interior, glimmering in opalescent half-light, revealed the situation to Lady Sarah's nimble mind. Swishing gracefully between Commander Blake and the palm, she raised her fan with an expostulatory gesture, very much like a guardian angel holding vigil at the gate of Paradise. Yet, at the same time, bending her head the least bit over the left shoulder, she whispered: "How timely, Miss Wyndham, that I should have stopped Mr. Blake from invading your *Buenretiro*.—Are you coming out, or will you give us permission to enter?"

The sky blue of the Imperial Dragoons now hove fully in sight.

"Not so bad. Hahaha, not so bad," crackled Prince Kropatchek. "The invasion of Lady Edgethorne is always a distinguished pleasure. Iss it not so, Miss Wyndham? Hahaha! Tremendious pleasure!" He brushed the palm leaves aside with his long, angular arms.

"Why, you know perfectly well you don't mean it, Prince," retorted Lady Sarah, pithily, "but, Mr. Blake, we have permission," slipping into the pale-greenish *clair-obscur* of the little den. "How per-

fectly romantic," she exclaimed, making herself quite at home on the divan at Roberta Wyndham's side. "Were you stranded on a tropical island? And now, —playing at Robinson Crusoe for two? How clever! Mr. Blake, isn't it positively cruel to spoil this *tête-à-tête*?" she added, pitilessly, with a sidelong glance at Roberta.

"You did not spoil it, Lady Sarah," said Roberta, with superb sweetness, "this very moment we were on the point of returning to civilization, and my poignant regret is that we tarried too long to afford *you* an undisturbed discovery of the Robinson Crusoe island with the assistance of—Mr. Blake"—a slight nod in his direction—"I *do* so abhor being in other people's way."

Lady Edgethorne smiled most engagingly. "You are ever so considerate, dearest Miss Wyndham."

"Oh, *thank* you, Lady Sarah," returned Roberta, even more sweetly than before. "But, Prince, you were to take me to the buffet?"

"Ah—the buffet—capital idea, Miss Wyndham, Hahaha," crackled Kropatchek, "I am at your service. With Lady Edgethorne's gracious permission?" A deferential bow.

"*You* wished to go, Prince? You suggested it yourself a minute ago?"

"Prince Kropatchek's thoughts are naturally preempted, you should pardon him for being forgetful, Miss Wyndham," suggested Lady Sarah, softly.

"*Certainement*—yes, yes, it was entirely my idea,

Hahaha," protested the Imperial Dragoon, beaming all around at everybody in turn.

"You don't care to join us, Lady Sarah?" inquired Roberta, amiably.

"Why, certainly," came the quick reply. "What do you say, Mr. Blake?" nodding to her escort, who had been a mute witness to the swift warfare between these two charming adversaries, "a little lemon ice *would* be so refreshing."

Lady Sarah took the lead, and a few minutes later she and her cavalier were passing the entrance to the conservatory when Blake abruptly stopped, as if he had been touched by an electric current.

A casual glance into the interior of the glass-covered gallery which harbored a thicket of palms and ferns and blooming plants had disclosed to him a strange picture that made his blood seethe. Vividly against the background of somber green studded with flaming camelia blooms, and facing the entrance, the lithe figure of Helen Lane in shimmering white, the fan half-raised as if to ward off an impending attack; before her the Viscount Ybarra speaking to her intensely in low tones. Helen's pale features showed an expression of vague fright, as a wavering glance like a mute appeal strayed over to Stewart Blake.

Without vouchsafing an explanation to Lady Edgethorne, Blake darted forward. A few steps and he was at Helen's side. Ybarra turned with a start, and the two men confronted one another at closest range, furious hatred a-flame in the eyes of one,

loathing contempt in the other's mien, but angry veins swelling purplish at his temples. A fierce, silent challenge passed between the two adversaries.

Then, ignoring the Viscount pointedly, Stewart Blake said to Helen: "Will you permit me to escort you to the ballroom, Miss Lane?"

A nod, and a glance which spoke more than words, and Helen swished past the Spaniard, Blake following. A little way down the conservatory Lady Edgethorne grasped her by both hands:

"Helen, for heaven's sake, what has happened?" she whispered.

"Not here. Come, let us get away as quickly as possible," the girl replied, nervously, and they took the direction of the ballroom.

Stewart Blake, still profoundly stirred, hesitated one brief moment, earnestly deliberating whether he ought not to turn back and have it out with that Spaniard once for all, settling his own score with him as well. However, cooler reflections prevailing, he went ahead, and a second later joined Lady Edgethorne and Helen.

Roberta Wyndham and Kropatchek, who had lingered behind in the drawing-room to give Blake and Lady Edgethorne a good start were coming toward the conservatory at the moment when that swiftly enacted episode culminated. Kropatchek, being rather near-sighted and too much occupied with his own enchanted thoughts to pay much heed to anything or anybody except the charming girl at his side, remained

in blessed ignorance of the whole affair, but Roberta took in the situation at a glance.

"Prince, I think we had better return to the ball-room; I don't care for refreshments," she said, quite categorically, and Kropatchek, ready to humor any little whim of his fair enslaver, obeyed eagerly, without a thought of questioning her capricious change of mind.

In the far corner of the conservatory Ybarra was alone, teeth clenched, in speechless rage, viciously plucking the flaming petals from a magnificent camelia which he held in his hand.

CHAPTER XXIX

DIPLOMACY

EASTER chimes clanged forth their joyous message in resonant peals, vibrating high aloft through the balsamic air bright with sunshine and laden with the fragrance of newborn spring; the dainty perfume of luxuriant flowerbeds intermingling with the acerb exhalations of blossoming shrubs and early budding trees.

Throngs of gayly clad people sauntering down Connecticut Avenue; children in snowy frocks, fresh, cheery faces demurely happy,—shy glances cast around with timid pride, to observe the admiring looks attracted by their holiday attire. Churchfolk promenading solemnly in groups, obedient to the sonorous summons of the chimes; trooping off into side streets bent for houses of worship which their consciences bade them seek.

Up New Hampshire Avenue whirled the smart landau of His Excellency, the German Ambassador, just returning from that little out of the way chapel where he was wont to minister to his spiritual wants. Around Dupont Circle the prancing horses trotted at a lively pace when, at the signal from the occupant, they came to a sudden halt near the intersection of Connecticut Avenue. Count Edelsheim alighted and, dismissing the carriage with curt directions,

walked briskly down this great thoroughfare, soldierly, sturdy, yet with the grace of the born aristocrat.

In a very few minutes he had reached the wide *porte cochère* of the British embassy, and disappeared unobtrusively through the iron gates.

When Count Edelsheim was ushered into the Ambassador's study, the stately form of Lord Florian Rugby, slightly bent with age, arose toweringly to receive him with exquisite amiability, almost bordering on friendliness; a greeting which the Count returned with a like degree of tactful cordiality.

This inevitable ceremony duly absolved, the distinguished diplomatists immediately became engrossed in animated conversation. Their meeting was not one of chance. Its purpose appeared perfectly understood, and there was no need for the time-honored practice of fencing for position ordinarily deemed indispensable in diplomatic intercourse.

"My dear Lord Florian," remarked Count Edelsheim, leaning back luxuriously in a broad leather chair, "our joint action of Friday was a *faux pas* pure and simple. Nothing more, nothing less."

Lord Rugby nodded gravely. "Very awkward situation,—very."

"Wasn't it Camponero who had previously made that sage observation about the 'sedative effect of moral suasion'?" With a twinkle in his eye.

"Quite so,—coupled with the brilliant suggestion of 'putting the American lion asleep,'" drawled Lord Florian in response.

"But the President's reply to our note was not quite as sedative as wished for, if my recollection serves me right?" laughed the Count.

Lord Florian caressed the short-cropped, whitening side whiskers tenderly with his fingertips: "A moderate disappointment,—seems to me, instead of putting our lion asleep we did some prodding——"

"—and the tickled lion will presently roar and paw—possibly snap his jaws, crunching a few empty heads by way of diversion——"

"A rather unpalatable diversion——"

"Palatable enough for a monster that has not been fed for an age and just wakes up with a healthy appetite," retorted Edelsheim, facetiously.

Lord Florian was betrayed into a dry, stunted chuckle, stopped short when scarcely started, as though he had inadvertently committed an unpardonable indiscretion and could not too promptly remedy the fault.—The supply of jollity and good humor was running at low ebb when nature set to work fashioning this eminent statesman out of mortal clay, and but on rarest occasions did he yield to the luxury of a real unstinted laugh.—However, neither did Atlas of ancient memory, *then* bearing the World's weight on his stooping shoulders, have much use for joviality in this line of business.—And there you are!

Presently Lord Rugby remarked: "You believe that friction is inevitable?"

"Precisely. We should not misjudge the temper of the American government. They mean to have their way."

"War?"

A regretful gesture was the answer.

"And the result?"

"If confined to these two combatants a conflict will not be of much importance,—beyond making a good market for English hardware."

"And Krupp guns?" His Lordship looking pleasantly at the Count.

Edelsheim did not reply to this little pleasantry.

"Have you heard from London?" Soberer, more serious reflection was traceable in the German diplomat's tone.

"The suggestion that, as to any further negotiations, I might prefer to be guided by circumstances immediately arising," came the answer,—“rather a late awakening,”—this with a slight shrug—“what could we do now?”

"I take it, the effect of the Emperor's personal appeal to the Queen has worn off——?" inquired Count Edelsheim, interestedly.

"Sir Edward's reports from Berlin have left no particle of doubt as to the chancellor's attitude, and in London apparently the conviction has matured that under the circumstances it would seem imprudent to subordinate considerations of national importance to family preferences of——" Another shrug.

"Your dear Sir Edward must have monopolized the Berlin Foreign Office to such an extent that they found no time to communicate with me," ventured Count Edelsheim, suppressing a quaint smile of satisfaction. The policy of non-interference between

America and Spain, urgently recommended in his reports to Berlin had scored beyond expectation, that was evident.

Momentary silence. Both men busy with their own thoughts.

Then Lord Rugby repeated his former question with shrewd emphasis.

"What can we do now?"

"Try a compromise along the lines we have already tentatively discussed," was Edelsheim's prompt answer, "independence for Cuba,—nothing else will do,—and it is best for the commercial interests of the rest of us."

"Hmm,—yes—probably the only way out of it?" assented Her Majesty's Ambassador, with a pensive nod. "And the proposition must come from Spain as a voluntary concession,—to preserve her prestige."

"How will you hammer *that* into Camponero's head?" Count Edelsheim raised his eyebrows quizzically.

The merest shadow of humor flickered around Lord Florian's firmly set lips. "We may utilize our *cher ami*——"

At this moment a liveried servant threw the door wide open with a sweep: "His Excellency, the French Ambassador!"

Quick, meaning glances exchanged between two mildly surprised diplomats as they simultaneously rose from their seats.

"How apropos!" murmured Lord Florian.

"*Wenn man den Wolf nennt, so kommt er gerennt,*

—and headlong into the trap,” commented Edelsheim *sotto voce*, with an amused smile, as M. de St. Pierre made his *entrée* with an elegant flourish,—head bent forward engagingly, arms delicately poised,—the pink of effervescent urbanity.

“A-ah—*mon cher Ambassadeurrrr*——” A sweeping bow toward Lord Rugby.

“*Soyez le bien venu-u, très cher ami-i-i*——” His Lordship returning the compliment with dignified courtesy.

“*M’sieu’ le Comte, je suis charmé*——” Repetition of the bow in the direction of Count Edelsheim.

“*M. l’Ambassadeur,—mes salutations les plus distinguées*——” A short military bend of the head.

And then a gingerly squeezing of fingertips all around.

Then, after some desultory remarks of a more or less trifling character, the conversation drifted toward the all-absorbing topic of the day,—the threatening crisis in Spanish-American relations. And the two nimble-witted representatives of Great Britain and Germany started a little game of shuttlecock and battledore, tossing the ball to and fro, till the Frenchman, bewildered from the mental exertion of following the whirring course of the feathered thing, succumbed to the hypnotic effect. And *then* they had him where they wanted him.

Lord Rugby made the first throw.

“The situation has not been essentially modified by our joint appearance at the White House,” he remarked, in that dignified, impassively courteous man-

ner which had earned a just reputation for him. "Perhaps our presentations should have been more conclusive?"

His Lordship looked suavely at the German colleague. The inflexion of the question, seemingly put to elicit assent, was so delicately shaded that the Initiated would not hesitate to take it as an invitation to contradict.

Count Edelsheim did not disappoint his *confrère*: he returned the ball.

With a great show of concern he replied: "I had misgivings about the whole matter from the start. We occupied precarious ground, as it were; but a still stronger expression of views might have produced quite an incalculable effect,—perchance a very undesirable one."

While addressed to Lord Rugby, his words were clearly aimed at the French Ambassador.

St. Pierre understood that in a vague way. Somewhat uneasily he glanced from one to the other, trying vainly to forecast the drift of the conversation; being unable to discern what the other two were driving at, he remained prudently silent. At previous conferences of a similar character he had persistently advocated a firm tone for that communication to the President of the United States, and the Englishman had supported him substantially, but now it began to dawn on him hazily that Lord Rugby was preparing to execute some kind of a flank movement.

Count Edelsheim presently tried another ball.

"A special cabinet meeting is probably now in

session at the White House to discuss the message which the President intends to send to Congress," said the Count,—again for the benefit of the French diplomat. "I heard last night at Senator Fairmount's reception that it was contemplated. *En passant* I suggested to Camponero, whom I met there, that it would seem advisable to make the best use of the remaining valuable time. But as usual he equivocated"—this with a shrug,—“and talked inanely about those stale propositions which are now practically disposed of.”

Lord Rugby caught the ball and sent it back.

“Some decisive move in another direction would appear advisable?” he suggested interrogatively in his persuasive, calmly polite manner.

“If a crisis is to be averted,—yes,” was the matter-of-fact reply of Count Edelsheim. “Procrastination and evasion cannot avail any longer. But I am opposed to any further interference on our part,—Camponero himself must act.”

This was a drive home, and the second round should begin.

Lord Rugby ruminated a few seconds. Then he reached for a large black portfolio, opened it, and drew forth a sheet of paper which contained a memorandum closely written in a scrawly hand.

“Here is a suggestion,” he said, nonchalantly, “which was brought to my attention last evening by a New York gentleman who has large interests in Porto Rico. I have looked it over casually. It really impresses me as worthy of serious consideration.

—Possibly it may present the nucleus of a practical solution? ”

He handed the memorandum to Count Edelsheim, who glanced at it perfunctorily, and in turn passed it on to the French Ambassador without a word of comment.

St. Pierre, who had up to the present time been a mute spectator to the game, received the paper with a polite gesture of thanks, adjusted his glasses to a pedantic niceness, and prepared to read, while his diplomatic *confrères*, apparently occupied with deep musings of their own, observed him slyly out of the corners of their eyes to gain from his features a clew as to the impression made by the reading.

Unmindful of two pairs of experienced, vigilant eyes, St. Pierre perused the scrawly lines with much gravity; screwed up his eyebrows; caressed his ample clean-shaven chin pensively with the left hand; read again, and then, letting his right arm slowly sink till hand and paper rested on his knees, he stared for a few minutes blankly at the counterfeit presentment of a venerable English statesman choking painfully in the coils of a prodigious white cravat on the wall opposite.

Solemn silence. Only a solitary blue-bottle-fly buzzed and bumped with a hollow plunk-plunk against the window panes in the vain attempt to escape into the warm spring-sunshine without.

Lord Rugby and Count Edelsheim once more crossed glances. They understood each other so well,—for once.

Raising his eyebrows imperceptibly, His Lordship remarked in a leisurely sort of way: "Cuba is a very tempting morsel. As matters stand now,—it may be counted as good as lost to Spain under any circumstances——" And, after a pause, he added, with slightly increased deliberation: "An independent State would be preferable to an American colony."

"A *war* could not stop with the annexation of Cuba alone!" Count Edelsheim, stoutly. "*L'appetit vient en mangeant!*"

St. Pierre, being slowly cornered, at last decided to relinquish his noncommittal attitude of silence.

"Quite correct as to the appetite,—quite correct," he said, in a patronizing way. "But Paris still believes that this appetite can be effectively spoiled. And by vigorous joint action rather than by concessions to the Washington government. I am still of the opinion that stronger representations should be made."

Count Edelsheim crossed his legs and started twirling his thumbs with laudable assiduity.

M. de St. Pierre, too much swelled with his own overshadowing importance, paid no heed to him, but kept his attention riveted on the document in his hands. He raised the paper once again close to his eyes, ran over it anew, shook his head pompously, and then spoke with the mien of a dictator who has made up his mind to deliver an ultimatum as the custodian of the destinies of a weaker nation.

"Abandon the sovereignty over Cuba? Detach the island from the Crown of Spain?—Madrid will

never consent! A revolution would immediately follow, the overthrow of the monarchy were certain.—And,—what would become of the bonds? ”

“ A valued champion of monarchical institutions ! ” Count Edelsheim bowed sideways with ironical politeness, still twirling his thumbs.

St. Pierre moistened his lips nervously. He didn't like Edelsheim's tone, or his manner, or his way of putting things.

“ Ah-hem, facetious, Count,—quite facetious.—But in fact—in fact, we——”

“ —live in an age of commercialism and must consider mainly the *bonds*,” the Count helped out. “ I sympathize with the French bondholders.”

“ The bonds,—*mais oui*—the pride of Spain humbled,—it would be unheard of,” stammered the representative of the French Republic, much confused.

“ Profoundly deplorable,” assented Lord Rugby, suavely, “ but circumstances have to be considered. Would it be wise to ignore possibilities even more mortifying than the release of a single island? ”

“ But Europe!—Europe cannot,—*dare* not look on with indifference——”

“ Europe?—A maze of interlinked, entangled, incongruous interests—diverging lines in all directions? There is no solidarity,” replied Lord Rugby, with an expression of angelic patience in his features, the eyes lifted mournfully to the ceiling.

The French diplomat gasped in astonishment: “ Lord Rugby,—ah—the assurances from your government——? ”

"Assurances from Her Majesty's government are always binding," emphasized the Briton, with even a suaver intonation, as if to demonstrate that his stock of patience was truly inexhaustible,—“we are most zealously solicitous for peace,—and shall be scrupulously neutral,—if war is forced—by Spain!”

“Forced by *Spain?*” The Frenchman looked ludicrously puzzled. “Ah,—in fact—ah—quite a new point of view!”

His Excellency St. Pierre was helplessly floundering; the situation had got beyond him. It flashed upon him now like a revelation that Her Majesty's representative had brazenly changed front, suddenly and completely. But St. Pierre was absolutely at a loss to account for it. He was dazed.

Under the Hussar mustaches of the German diplomat lingered the faintest traces of a sympathetic smile which came treacherously near being sarcastic,—but this faded away instantly when St. Pierre turned to him with the perplexed query: “What—what am *I* to do—? My government——”

Count Edelsheim's impressive gray eyes emitted merely the innocent rays of disinterested solicitude when he replied, pleasantly: “At times Ambassadors rely on their *own* counsel!”

Now it was Rugby's turn again.

“Camponero would give renewed proof of his eminent prudence, if he were to digest this proposition thoroughly, and—*act* upon it without delay,” His Lordship chimed in amiably. “Possibly you may

deem it advisable to confer with him, M. de St. Pierre?"

The French Ambassador, still holding the paper in his hand, seemed undecided.

"The sooner, the better," recommended Count Edelsheim dryly.—And then the ball whirred faster and faster to the end of the game.

"Perhaps I had better——" St. Pierre began, reluctantly.

"—have a talk with Camponero, of course, before it is too late," supplied Edelsheim, doing his level best to suppress his impatience.

"But he might not be inclined to discuss——"

"An earnest suggestion coming from *such* a source could not be ignored by anybody," assured Lord Florian, blandly.

"Most certainly not," the Count added his testimony.

"Your persuasive influence, M. de St. Pierre, has all along proved equal to the most subtle tests, and it is most urgently needed at this critical juncture. No one else but *you* would be able to steer Camponero properly and safely——" urged Rugby.

"Ah!—My very conviction," murmured Edelsheim in a stage whisper.

St. Pierre's vanity was now on the melting point, and he did some very hard thinking for a few moments, a troubled expression clouding his features.

He felt uncomfortable. That kind of an errand he did not relish at all. Still, it was important for his friend Camponero to be informed regarding these

latest developments. Yes,—he had better go,—and go at once!

Slowly he arose to address his formal *adieux* to the other two distinguished gentlemen when Lord Rugby, who had risen simultaneously, stepped forward.

“I believe a French translation would serve your purpose better, M. de St. Pierre,” he suggested, holding out his hand to receive the memorandum which the Frenchman still clutched tightly in his fingers. For no diplomat cares to have an original manuscript document go out of his possession. Then he pressed an electric button on his desk and said to the entering servant: “Tell Mr. Epsley I would like to see him.”

When the secretary appeared, Lord Rugby handed him the memorandum.

“Have a French translation made of this, Mr. Epsley. Also a copy of the English original, and let me have both as promptly as feasible,—M. de St. Pierre is waiting.”

The alert secretary returned with the required copies after a suspiciously brief lapse of time. Evidently they had most excellent facilities at the British embassy for making French translations on the very shortest notice,—supposing, of course, that they did not keep them in stock.

St. Pierre pocketed the papers, and bowing his acknowledgment very formally, first to the one then to the other Ambassador, was ready to leave.

Count Edelsheim, removing his eye-glasses with a polite wave of the hand, bowed in turn. Lord Rugby

reciprocated the Frenchman's formal courtesy most punctiliously.

And M. de St. Pierre withdrew, sniffing imperceptibly, as though his esthetic nasal organ were irritated by a very unpleasant sensation.

The two remaining diplomats smiled shrewdly at each other, not unlike two augurs of ancient Roman times. Count Edelsheim, shying a glance at the door which just had closed behind their French *confrère*, coughed slightly.

"A delicate mission," he observed, whipping his glasses playfully against the palm of the left hand.

"He will need all his wits," confirmed Lord Florian.

"But I believe he at last understands the situation, —*now*," said Edelsheim, with a quizzical grimace.

CHAPTER XXX

DON PIO WRITES A NOTE

PERHAPS an hour later two very much perplexed diplomats sat facing each other in the somber study of the Spanish embassy.

Before them on the mahogany writing table lay a little typewritten statement, the one which M. de St. Pierre had received from the hands of Lord Florian Rugby. They had been discussing it for a good quarter of an hour, and their talk had taken a wide range. The events of the last months passed in rapid review: the manifold complications woven into the great international play on whose final act the curtain was about to rise. They went over the various phases of the negotiations, discussing them from their own narrow viewpoints with such dim light as their limited information would afford; patching up knowledge with guesswork to their own satisfaction.

Swathed in self-sufficiency they felt no warning that the flimsy house of cards which they had busily constructed on the shifting sands of petty intrigue was about to topple, crashing down over their heads. Mutterings of a majestic, fearsome storm rapidly approaching were about them in the air, but they failed to realize their ominous import. Their desperately befuddled little brains lacked the faculty

of deciphering the signs of the times, traced in phosphorescent hieroglyphs upon the lowering clouds by fingers writing with blood and fire, the fingers of destiny,—slow, wrathful, immutable.

Don Pio de Camponero squeezed his monocle tightly into the right eye and, pursing his lips, stared intently at his French colleague.

“What do you make of it, St. Pierre?” he asked at length.

“I told you where it comes from,” replied the other, shrugging his shoulders. “They were very urgent about it.”

Don Pio ruminated again, fingers drumming on the mahogany. “Do you think that *he* is at the bottom of it?”

“He?”—St. Pierre, puzzled.

“Yes,—Crane, of course.”

“Ah,—you mean that Rugby was acting as catspaw for the State Department?”

“Doesn’t it seem the most natural inference?” Don Pio asked in turn, with a shrewd wink.

“If that were the case, it would indicate that these fellows here are afraid to force the issue——”

“Exactly,” confirmed Don Pio, with an air of great complacency.

“A feint?” St. Pierre, rather incredulously.

“An *escamoterie*, which we can meet with ease. And I will show you how.” Don Pio reached for a pen and a sheet of paper and began to scribble.

M. de St. Pierre lighted a cigarette and watched him indolently.

Presently Don Pio had finished his screech. He blotted the writing, scanned it carefully, smiling like a man exceedingly pleased with himself, made a few changes in the phraseology, and then:

"This covers the salient points. Let me read it to you, St. Pierre, and see what you think of it."

Adjusting his monocle, he read:

"In view of the earnest and repeated request of His Holiness, supported resolutely by declarations and friendly counsels of the representatives of the six great European Powers, my Government has resolved to direct the Governor-General of Cuba to grant an immediate suspension of hostilities. The Government of Her Majesty, the Queen Regent, by this most important step has set the crown to her extraordinary efforts to obtain pacification of Cuba through the instrumentalities of reason and right.

"Furthermore I beg to inform Your Excellency that an autonomic constitution which will give the island a system at least as liberal as that which exists in the Dominion of Canada will within a short time enter upon the stage of complete development. The franchise and liberties to be granted to the Cubans are such that no motive or pretext is left for claiming any fuller measure thereof."

Don Pio laid the manuscript on the table, leaned back in his chair, dropped the monocle with a lightning twitch of his eye-muscles, and folded his hands over the stomach, with an expression of "Now-how-do-you-like-*that*-my-friend-isn't-it-grand?" in his face.

St. Pierre studied the pattern of the carpet with absorbing zeal, and said nothing.

"Ah-ahem!" Don Pio, visibly piqued by this uncomplimentary silence, cleared his throat for a re-enforcement of his position by argument.

"You observe I have touched merely on the crucial points,—armistice and autonomy. The other propositions of your memorandum can be disposed of in a '*note verbale*,' they are of minor importance, and we have been willing to concede them for some time past,—at the proper moment. The main point is to eliminate the demand for Cuban independence. Quite out of the question, of course, to grant that! I offer *autonomy* in its place. The Yankees will be satisfied with this excellent substitute for the real article. They *have* to be!"

St. Pierre looked dubious. "But suppose, they are silly enough not to acquiesce in your substitute? Suppose they kick the kettle over, spilling the fish and take their chances of being scalded? What will become of the Cuban bonds guaranteed by Spain, a hundred millions of them in the hands of French investors?"

"Spain's territorial integrity and the bonds are safe in the hands of the European powers," retorted Don Pio, haughtily.

"But, Camponero——"

"Tut, tut," said Don Pio, "I am quite justified in taking this point of view. Our good friends in the State Department are badly flustered. They

stand in awe of the concerted strength of Europe, and——”

“But remember Rugby’s significant expressions and the peculiar attitude of Edelsheim,—I told you——” St. Pierre expostulated.

“*Bah!*—Rugby,—Edelsheim!—We do not expect Germany or England to be aggressively friendly, but they will support the other powers passively. I have never placed reliance on protestations of friendship from Downing Street.—English diplomacy is like a sausage, always thick in the middle and tapering at both ends,—but we do not need them. The Washington government dare not fight!”

There he sat, arrogant, pompous, puffed up like a pouter pigeon; glorying in his wondrous prescience and perspicacity.

“I shall send this note. It will definitely dispose of American pretense. It will clear the situation.” He rang an electric bell, and curtly commanded the entering servant: “Vizconde Ybarra!”

The lackey returned deferentially: “The Vizconde has gone to New York, Your Excellency. He is not expected until to-morrow night.”

Don Pio made an impatient gesture of dismissal and the servant disappeared.

“I shall go personally to the State Department and deliver this memorandum,—to-morrow.”

St. Pierre rose to go: “*Bonne chance, mon ami,—au revoir!*”

Arriving at his residence, M. de St. Pierre was handed a telegram by his secretry: “From the For-

eign Office,—it came half an hour ago, Your Excellency. I just completed the deciphering.”

The Ambassador took the slip of paper and read:

“You will defer any further steps looking toward joint action until you receive specific advices from me. This instruction is confidential.

LACROIX.”

For a moment M. de St. Pierre gazed absent-mindedly at the secretary. Then he folded the paper mechanically, put it in his pocket, and murmured:

“Bonne chance, mon ami,—bonne chance!”

The clouds were gathering fast, and, one after the other, the European governments sought shelter.

CHAPTER XXXI

HIS EXCELLENCY'S PASSPORTS

"SECRETARY CRANE will have the honor to await the Ambassador's call at eleven o'clock," was the telephonic reply of the State Department to an inquiry made in like manner by the Spanish embassy consulting the said high functionary's pleasure as to the time when it would be convenient for him to receive His Excellency, Don Pio de Camponero.

Even in advance of the appointed hour, Secretary Crane occupied his customary station at the further end of that spacious apartment, known as the "Diplomatic Room," where representatives of foreign nations having business with the State Department were wont to be received.

Stiffly erect, hands folded on the back, he walked slowly up and down, a thin, wiry, well-groomed figure, with a perfect mask of a face that revealed no vestige of emotional concern.

And the whole ensemble of furnishings and stage-setting in that vast apartment seemed admirably designed to form a fitting background for the ruling spirit of the place. Rows of stiff-backed chairs guarding prim and sober-tinted rugs in silent array; the long stilty-legged, green-covered table; that yawning fireplace, surmounted by a cramped but enterprising mahogany eagle, obstinately intent upon soar-

ing, in defiance of all the well-defined rules of aerial navigation; the mirthless, tremendously imposing portraits of departed secretaries elbowing one another in the scant available space on the walls.

Occasionally a glance at the discreetly ticking clock whose finger methodically pushed on toward the full hour of eleven. Then he resumed his walk, as methodically as the finger of the clock.

The low notes of the chimes striking the hour had scarcely melted away when the Spanish diplomat, no less punctual than the eminent Secretary, was ushered into the austere Presence.

Don Pio approached with almost juvenile agility. Wreathed in smiles he greeted the Secretary of State with an exotic warmth not in the least impaired by the cold, nay, icy formality of that eminent functionary. Don Pio's artistically balanced exuberance simply could not be ruffled, much less destroyed, by any degree of freezing temperature exuding from the official Polar Zone across the long green table. He knew he had a trump card up his sleeve that must take the trick! And he was going to play it with greatest finesse, according to the rules of the diplomatic Hoyle: "Hit hard, if you can, but always with the utmost manifestation of geniality and of warmest friendship."

And Don Pio meant to hit hard. He was going to lay bare that whole abominable web of American hypocrisy and blatant bluff, and finish the game right then and there,—but gently, and pleasantly, with most charming *bienséance*. That was the programme!

"Mr. Secretary," he said, bestowing the sunniest smile in his rich assortment of scrupulously graded courtesy on that rigid, marble-faced official, "I have the honor of presenting to you a memorandum which I believe——"

"I thank you, Mr. Ambassador," interrupted the Secretary, coldly, took the proffered note, and laid it on the green table, without deigning it worthy of a look.

Don Pio stopped abruptly in the beginning of his speech and gazed at the Secretary with mild compassion. No abatement in the smile.

"Ah-hem, Mr. Secretary, perhaps you will have the *obligeance* to glance at——"

"I *thank* you, Mr. Ambassador, I shall take occasion to peruse the memorandum later on." This courteously, yet in a tone which precluded further argument.

"But, my dear Mr. Secretary——"

"Mr. Ambassador,—before we enter upon any discussion of pending questions," said the Secretary, with that same passionless finality, "I should prefer to dispose of a personal matter which has been brought to my attention."

Camponero looked up in astonishment. This sounded rather serious. Crane must have some sort of surprise *in petto*. What could it be? Surprises in diplomacy are nearly always annoying. Don Pio had trouble keeping that smile on his face, but still he succeeded fairly.

"I shall be delighted to discuss any question which

recommends itself to your discriminative judgment, Mr. Secretary," he bowed.

Secretary Crane quietly ran his fingers through some papers on the table before him, and drew out one of them.

"Mr. Ambassador, could you give me a clew as to the authenticity of this?" handing a letter across the table.

Don Pio bent politely forward to receive the paper.

Instantly he knew! One single glance sufficed to tell him what it was!

He felt like dropping from his chair,—the identical letter to which he had attached his signature at Ybarra's demand not so long ago.

He forgot his smile, and stared at his own handwriting as if it were a ghost confronting him.

Presently he laid the letter down and rose, cold drops of perspiration on his forehead, the lips twitching nervously.

"That,—that is——"

"A forgery?" suggested the Secretary, calmly.

Don Pio's thoughts were in a whirl. What should he do? Take advantage of Crane's question and deny it? But of course, Crane knew perfectly well that it was genuine. The letter must have been stolen! A denial would be puerile. He was caught! How should he pull himself out of this ugly mess? He could not think quickly enough of any subterfuge. As well admit it and then try to find some sort of explanation later on.

Pulling himself together, he said: "—it is my signature, but I——"

"I am obliged to you for the information, Mr. Ambassador,"—the Secretary spoke with cutting frigidity,—“Your Excellency’s passports will be ready within an hour!”

If lightning had blazed down from a clear sky it could not have paralyzed Don Pio de Camponero more completely than this announcement.

He staggered back, fairly gasping for air, pale and staring.

"Mr. Se—cretary—I——"

"I have the honor to wish Your Excellency a safe journey home,"—the phrase sounded like a grim mockery—"Further communications will pass through the hands of our representative at Madrid."

Camponero realized that the game was lost beyond hope of recuperation. His training of many years, however, saved him from utter collapse.

Straightening up defiantly he cast a haughty glance at the insignificant-looking man across the green table. Slowly removing his monocle he made a supercilious bow, turned wordless around, and strutted out like a peacock.

Outside, in the corridor, a crowd of newspaper reporters swarming, gathered to ply the distinguished diplomatist with questions. But he waved them impatiently aside and stalked haughtily into the elevator.

Once in his carriage, he threw himself vehemently into the cushions, his fists clenched: "*Damn* that fellow Ybarra!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LADY IN BLACK

"HE always likes a cozy fire when he comes home, and who could blame him? It is so much comfort. The nights are still quite raw."

Diego was squatting in front of the fireplace in Viscount Ybarra's den, laying on a few fresh logs and striving to coax a blaze from the inert embers which still glowed dimly under a thin cover of ashes. When the first sputtering tongues shot up, licking greedily about the new supply, he arose, casting a critical look about the room and at the table where the candles on two old-fashioned, cumbrous silver candelabra had just been lighted. Between them a silver tea kettle hummed, the cigarette case, with match safe and ash tray, dainty little affairs of Oriental pattern and workmanship close at hand; an ink-stand, pens and writing paper neatly arranged for present use.

"Tea is ready," murmured Diego, with a nod of satisfaction,—*"everything in its place."* He stood musing for a while, stroking his clean-shaven chin. "I wonder whether Don Genoso is aware of all that happened this morning," shaking his head mournfully. "What times, oh, what times are these! Could anyone have expected such bad things? Ah,

these Americans! They are ruffians! They do not know how gentlemen must behave! ”

The old man sighed and began fussing about the table; smoothing out the writing paper, examining the little alcohol burner under the tea kettle, placing the frail china cup straight under the spout, opening the cigarette case to make sure there was a sufficient supply of the fragrant Servian Specialities. His wandering eyes suddenly fell upon a slender morocco case from which a shining object protruded,—a small, delicately chiseled golden serpent’s head set with glittering emerald eyes.

“How careless,” ejaculated the old servant, “to leave a dangerous thing like that lying around! ”

He took it up, and tugging gently at the golden head unsheathed a tiny dagger, the bluish steel glinting fitfully in the flickering candle light. “Coated with the most deadly poison,” he murmured, with a shudder, “the tiniest scratch means instant death! I remember well when the Sultan of Morocco presented it to Don Genoso as a keepsake. ‘Here is a friend,’ he said, ‘that will not betray you, even though all others have proven false; let it be your constant companion, and you have nothing to fear.’—A grewsome thing! How those green eyes glitter,—as if they were alive—Ugh! He should hide it away.”

Twitching fingers shoved the dagger carefully back into the sheath, and he placed the leather case close to the writing paper where the Viscount could not fail to notice it.

"A riddle, it is a riddle to me," glancing at the clock which had just struck the eleventh hour; "he should have been here long ago. The telegrams I sent to the train must have missed him, or he would have come home before going to dinner. Yet I sent another message to the Club! he should have received that if he were there. It is beyond my understanding," he sighed again,—“did he not say to me when he left for New York: ‘Diego, have everything ready on my return, I must write some important letters, I shall be home early.’ Where can he be?”

The old man breathed deeply. "Yet wherever he is he must have heard the news. Bad tidings always spread like wildfire."

Walking up to a window he raised the shade and peered out into the dark, misty night, listening for footsteps on the pavement. He heard nothing, re-adjusted the shade and shook his head doubtfully.

"Now Don Genoso is master here," he resumed his soliloquy. "How suddenly things change! An Ambassador snuffed out like a candle; yes, a mere candle! And how he rushed away in a whirlwind—pooh! That ugly expression in his face when he handed me the note for Don Genoso. He looked poison at me,—poison—Brr-r!"

On tiptoe he approached the writing table, picked up the letter between his fingertips, and held it up against the candle light, as if the thick envelope could thus be coaxed to give up its secrets, or he might discover any poison lurking within that innocent white paper covering.

Now a knock at the door. Diego hastily dropped the letter with a guilty shock and glanced suspiciously over his shoulder. The head of a servant appeared in the half-opened door.

"Señor Diego," whispered the man, "that lady who was here earlier in the evening has returned. She will not be refused. She is very insistent and says she must see the Count to-night on some pressing matter concerning him personally."

"The lady in black? I had quite forgotten." Diego's brow clouded. He pondered for a moment. Then: "It may be important information which the Viscount expects. Tell her—or stay, I will rather go myself and ask her to wait in the reception room until he comes. Yes, that is best, I think. And you may go to bed, Pedro. I shall remain here and one is enough."

Within a few minutes Diego had returned to the Viscount's apartment. "She is a mystery," he mumbled to himself, pacing to and fro, hands folded on his back. "What may she want? She would not tell me, but insisted that she must see the master himself. Not even did she lift her veil. It is puzzling. Hmh,—I could not distinguish her features through the heavy veil,—she seems to be young,—perhaps pretty——"

The old man smiled shrewdly to himself: "We are young, yes, we are young; but no," shaking his head in a deprecatory way, "it would be such an indiscretion,—he is too prudent——"

A quick, firm step without, and the dutiful re-

tainer, sharply aroused from his desultory reflections hastened to open the door for his young master. Greeting him with a deferential, yet familiar, bow, he held out his hand for the Viscount's hat and cane.

Ybarra returned the welcome with scarcely a passing nod, and brusquely threw off his inverness. His manner was nervous and preoccupied. He tore off his gloves and tossed them carelessly on the table, never uttering a word.

Then, stepping over to the fireplace, he drew up a chair, sank into the soft cushions, and stared at the flames, brows contracted, features livid with vicious hatred.

"Damn the luck!" he snarled, "everything is going to smash!"

As though his own voice grated on his nerves he shivered involuntarily. Rising abruptly he held his palms toward the fire and scolded sharply:

"It is chilly here. Why can't you have the room comfortable, Diego? You are getting lazy! I presume it is troublesome to attend properly to my wants."

The old man was dumfounded; he felt deeply hurt. The master was excitable, perhaps eccentric at times, and unreasonable, but never had he questioned the old retainer's circumspect and loyal devotion to his personal well being. And never had Diego known the master to act so strangely. Watching him with anxious mien he half started to explain and to show the injustice of the reproach just uttered, but halted irresolutely. Tears welled up to his eyes,

he stuttered some unintelligible words, his jaw dropped, and his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth.

However, Ybarra paid no further attention to the flustered servant. "Pshaw," he muttered, "my turn will come yet! I am no dotard. I shall square my account with all of them!" A deep scowl settled on his face as he glared at the sputtering flames. Presently like one scared up from a dismal dream, he peered furtively around, as though he dreaded to see some uncanny presence lurking behind his back. His eyes snapped when he discovered Diego motionless and gaping beside the table.

In a trice he shook off the restraint under which the spell had held him. "You still here? What do you want?" he frowned. "A-ah," running his hand nervously through his thick black hair, "the air is stifling, oppressive,—intolerable——"

"Don Genoso," faltered the old servant, "I only wanted to remind you that Don Pio——"

"The Ambassador,—I must see him at once. Diego, hurry downstairs and announce me."

"His Excellency——?" gasped Diego.

"Hell and damnation!" flared Ybarra, "are you dull or silly? Yes, yes, *His Excellency*, do you hear? I want to see him, *now*, without delay."

"Don Pio left hurriedly for New York this afternoon," spluttered the old man, "he gave me that letter for you, Don Genoso," pointing to the table.

"*What!* To New York? Without waiting for my return?"

"You do not know, then, what happened at the State Department?" asked Diego, anxious excitement in his voice, "he——"

"I know all that," came the curt reply, "the sparrows whistle it from the roofs. It was talked about at Pierulsky's."

"Pierulsky's? You were then at the Baron's house?"

The Viscount ignored the astonished inquiry. "Tell me about Don Pio," he demanded, impatiently, "and be quick about it. My time is precious."

"After what happened this morning," Diego hastened to relate, "he was in a hurry to leave without being compelled to make his *adieux* to anybody. When he returned from the State Department he fumed and stormed, and none of us knew what it was about. The whole place was in an uproar. He ordered Fernando to pack his trunks at once, and he gave orders to have all his private effects boxed. Then we suspected that something serious must have happened, and that he was leaving for good. Several Ambassadors and ministers called in the early afternoon, but he sent word out that he was ill. Not even did he see M. de St. Pierre.

"Soon after coming in he asked for you, Don Genoso, and when he heard that you were still in New York he sent for me and dictated a telegram which I should send you. He wanted you to stay there awaiting him. I sent it, but word came that you had started for Washington. Then I tele-

graphed to the train that an urgent matter awaited you here on your return. You did not receive that message? As you did not come I sent a note to the Club, because Don Pio had given me a letter for you, but you had not been there, Don Genoso, and they did not know where you might be."

Ybarra, who had been walking up and down the room restlessly while Diego rattled off his recital, stopped abruptly before the old man: "Why,—didn't you remember that I was to take dinner at Pierulsky's? You could have found me there."

"Begging your pardon, Don Genoso, but you may have forgotten to tell me——"

"Suppose I did forget," came the crabbed retort, "why didn't you ask?"

"But you said to me, Don Genoso——"

"Yes, I said, I *said*—stop your stupid babbling! That eternal drivel would wear out a saint's patience. Where is the letter?"

"Here, Don Genoso." Trembling with anguish, the old man went to the writing table and picked up the note. "But there is something else which——"

"More croaking, old raven?" rasped the Viscount, thunderclouds on his brow. "What now?" Tearing the envelope he began reading the Ambassador's missive.

"A lady is here——"

Ybarra looked up sharply. "A lady?"

"A lady, yes. She is waiting in the reception room. She says she has something important——"

"Lady? What sort of *lady*?"

"A young lady, I should judge, though I did not see her face." Diego looked dubiously at his young master.

"A young lady? At this hour of night? What does she want?"

"She would not tell me, but insists that she must see you in person, Don Genoso. She was here earlier in the evening, and as she did not find you at home then, came again."

"What in the devil's name do I want with a lady here?" the Viscount burst forth, wrathfully. "I have no time to waste on ladies now." Then, immediately recovering his self-control, he added in a firm tone: "I cannot see her,—I don't want to. Get rid of her somehow. Tell her I am too busy,—to come back to-morrow."

The old man shook his head. "I have urged her to do so, but it availed not. She is obstinate. I could not persuade her to leave."

Ybarra did not reply at once. A curious, rapid succession of thoughts coursed quaintly through a wide range of fanciful possibilities. "Important?" he murmured, "what could it be?" Ah, well, the simplest way was to see her and find out.

"Well, then," he said, in a voice that sounded strangely calm, "show her in and I will get rid of her. But remember, if—if the interview drags too long interrupt us. At any rate come to me after she is gone; there is a great deal to be done before morning. Go now!"

The old man left the room, and Ybarra, seating himself at the writing table, resumed the perusal of the Ambassador's memorandum. He had not read many lines when a terrific change came over his features.

"The letter!" he exclaimed, with intense excitement, "they have the Blanco letter! *That* was the reason for Camponero's dismissal——!"

A tempest of alarming conjectures and surmises made his brain reel. This intelligence all but crushed him. A catastrophe had engulfed them. Don Pio already swept away by the onrush, he himself surely the next to follow. The fury of the wrathful elements upon them—no way to escape. The game was lost! All,—*all* was lost! The bitter fruit of crushing defeat the only result of the ambitious efforts of his life——"

The door opened and Diego ushered a lady into the room with circumstantial ceremony.

Just a meaningless fleeting glance from Ybarra and a wave of the hand: "Madame will please be seated," he said, with impersonal courtesy, pointing to a chair, still enthralled by the overpowering knowledge imparted in the Ambassador's letter.

Diego slunk away, shutting the door softly.

The stillness of night hovered over the apartment; nothing audible but the low ticking of the little silver clock on the table.

The lady had remained standing in spite of Ybarra's courteous, if formal, solicitation; silent and motionless. Then, Ybarra repeating his invitation

with some impatience, she took a step forward and threw back the heavy veil.

The Viscount's eyes met her's—for the flash of a second. He bounded from his chair with a hoarse outcry, his face blanching:

“*Mary*——!”

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE PAYING OF THE WAGE

WHEN Diego slid out from the Viscount's apartment he retired discreetly to his accustomed haunt, the reception room, where he left the door ajar so that he might be apprised when the late visitor should take her departure. Sitting down in a big armchair he folded his hands over his stomach and abandoned himself to philosophical reveries.

A strange visit, he mused,—passing strange. What might be the object? Secret information about some important matter? But women were not employed on political errands—not that he knew of, and he, if anyone, was familiar with all the phases of the spy system. A love affair? Tush, tush,—that was quite out of the question. That could not be. But what in the name of the Virgin could it be then? The more he ruminated, the more uneasy Diego became. An obstinate desire to know what was going on in that room yonder stirred him. It gnawed at him, it became well nigh ungovernable, insufferable. But eavesdropping? Ah, how could he, Diego, stoop so low, disparage his dignity!

Yet the trenchant craving would not be stilled. He could not account for this uneasiness. Never before had curiosity troubled him so persistently.

The old man was vexed at his own effrontery—actually aching to spy on his master——!

He arose, tiptoed out of the room into the corridor toward that door——

Then deep shame at this very impudence welled up in him. Sheepishly he retraced his steps and sank back into the armchair with a sigh. But all the same he could not rid himself of that weird feeling of anxiety,—a fateful, mysterious presentiment of evil.

He got up once more and stalked restlessly about the little reception chamber, up and down, up and down, mumbling incessantly to himself. Perhaps it might be time to interrupt that conversation?

Glancing at the clock he realized there was no excuse for that, as the visitor had been with his master scarcely five minutes. How these minutes dragged! They seemed like hours to him!

Again he settled in his armchair and stared vacantly at the clock—at the pictures on the wall—at nothing.

His head sank down on his breast,—the eyes closed mechanically—he dropped into a doze——

Suddenly he awoke with a start—some noise—the creaking of a door or something.

He blinked his eyes, half drowsily. A dark shadow seemed to swish past him.

The old man jumped from his chair, his heart palpitating. He rushed out of the room. The corridor was empty, but the Viscount's door wide ajar. A few bounding steps brought him there. He entered the apartment.

An appalling sight met his horror-stricken eyes:

Viscount Ybarra, in half reclining posture on the floor, the body supported by the left elbow and braced against a cushioned chair. He was apparently unconscious, breathing in short, heavy gasps, like a person in the throes of suffocation. Bluish pallor overspread his face, the shirt spotted by crimson drops oozing from a small wound at the throat.

Just then the body shook in frightful convulsions. One last gurgling sound. The muscles relaxed, glassy eyes upturned, the body sagged heavily to the floor. One arm nearly touched a tiny golden dagger, lying close by on the crumpled rug.

Old Diego gave one fierce, inarticulate cry, and broke down on his knees by his master's side.

In the fitful light of the street lamps belated pedestrians might have seen the shadowy form of a young woman in dark promenade dress flitting past them like an apparition. A black veil, half thrown back over the hat, revealed fixedly staring, frightened eyes and the pallor of a waxen face. Rapidly she walked, aimlessly, yet with the appearance of following a set purpose.

Once a policeman, leaning lazily against the dingy window of a corner store, glanced curiously at the unwonted vision. His suspicion aroused on account of the late hour rather inclined him to halt the young woman and interrogate her. But her firm step, the forbidding expression in her features made him doubtful; he refrained from detaining her. Muttering caustic comments to himself he followed

the vision with his eyes until it melted away in the misty gloom. Presently he dismissed the subject with a shrug, and whistling softly, continued on his regular round.

Now the young woman had crossed Rock Creek, without apparently being conscious of the direction she was taking. On she went, past the abodes of the wealthy, past modest and unpretentious houses, quiescent in the embrace of peaceful slumber; further on, to the hovels of the lowly, through dimly lighted, squalid streets; feverishly restless, callous to her distasteful surroundings. An irresistible instinct urged her steps; a power ever more potent than the feeble human will, the finger of destiny pointed the way.

Dismal passages leading to the dark waters of the Potomac loomed before her. Utter blackness ahead, evil odors filling the foggy atmosphere. Even the glimmer of the few mist-veiled lamps which heretofore had lighted the road at distant intervals had ceased.

Then the monotonous gurgling of the lapping waves at her feet, and a gloomy vista of endless night beyond——

She halted with a shudder. As she stared helplessly into the yawning darkness before her, a faint glimmering seemed vaguely to illuminate the opaque solitude of swiftly rushing waters. Gradually the glimmering took shape. It formed into the dimly phosphorescent outlines of a spectral, prostrate figure, a strangely quiet face, with half-closed, lightless eyes, unearthly, awful in its stark rigidity——

Mary Ellwood's feverish eyes were riveted resistlessly on the ghastly apparition conjured up before her vision. Her nerves strung to utmost tension, she broke into frantic, convulsive, tearless sobs.

"Juan," she whispered, in abject terror. "Juan,—my love—awake,—oh, awake! I did not strike when I lifted the dagger—I did not strike—Oh, my God! It cannot be!"

But no earthly voice answered her appeal.

"Juan!" she cried again, hoarsely and almost bereft of reason by horrible fear, "if you love me, awake! Come to my arms!"

Yet the only response was the monotonous gurgling of the swift current,—and slowly—slowly—the dimly traced outlines of the spectral picture faded—vanished.

A shriek of frenzied despair rent the air. "Have pity on me, Juan! Don't leave me! I love you, oh, I love you so dearly! I am coming to you, Juan,—I come——"

Her frail body swayed, she lurched wildly forward with outstretched arms.

And the rushing waters closed greedily over their prey.

Then, almost imperceptibly, a soft light began to ooze down through the darksome skies.

The brightness grew. It waxed more intense. The ever thinning veil of filmy vapor dissolved: the wondrous radiance of the vernal moon burst forth upon the mighty stream in all the glory of her chasten-

ing splendor, decking the vast undulating expanse with a lustrous shroud of clinging softness.

Low-voiced, rippling waves sweetly crooned a soothing lullaby, and the mournful night wind carried the dulcet strain to the dreamily swaying boughs of the aspen. Onward it floated through space, like a prayer——

And underneath the silvery sheen of moonlit waves the all-conquering passionless calm of death; that weird and inscrutable mystery which ushers the grief-worn human soul, released from earthly bondage, into the glorious realms of the Infinite.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"ALL MY HEART"

HELEN LANE was standing by the fireplace in her den while her aunt sat wearily in the big chair by the window. Affairs had come to a crisis with the girl. Since the renewal of Ybarra's threatening demand upon her at the Spanish embassy ball she had lived in a state of half-numbed terror in which she could hardly think. But at last she had made up her mind, and this afternoon she was resolved to tell Mrs. Butworth exactly what occurred. If then her aunt was really in Ybarra's clutches, she meant to go at once to her uncle and see if, through his powerful influence, some engine of government could not be employed to remove the hateful Spaniard from the scene.

With pulses throbbing with excitement and heart beating almost to suffocation, the girl yet managed to retain the outward semblance of calm as she went straight at her trouble.

"You have asked me repeatedly, auntie," she began, "to marry Viscount Ybarra. And I have told you that I did not and could not love him. You have urged that I could learn to care for him, and that his position in the world and at the Spanish court would compensate. I had supposed that your feeling about

it was because of the social position in Europe that would result for you from such a marriage, and, despite my detestation of the man, I had hesitated to say finally that I would not marry him. But he has been pressing me in a manner that has made me decide to tell you plainly about it. He has tried to make me accept him, auntie, by threats against you!"

"Threats!" cried Mrs. Butworth, in astonishment, "against me? What do you mean, Helen?"

"I mean just that," replied the girl, steadily. "Threats against you. I don't know just what he threatens, but he says he has some terrible secret, the exposure of which would ruin you socially even here in Washington, and he threatens to expose it unless I marry him."


For a few moments Mrs. Butworth sat as if stunned by the girl's words. It was so sudden, so unexpected and so absolutely false that she could not think, much less find expression for thought.

The hesitation shocked the girl, and a ghastly fear took possession of her that perhaps, after all, there might be some foundation for the threats.

Then the older woman found her tongue. "But, Helen!" she cried. "It isn't true! It's a lie! Oh——"

The sudden revulsion her aunt's exclamation brought overwhelmed the girl and she burst into tears, throwing herself on her knees beside the older woman's chair, with her arms around Mrs. Butworth's neck. "Oh, auntie!" she cried.

An ecstasy of anger and regret possessed Mrs.



Butworth. In a flash she comprehended the villainy of Ybarra and the falsity of his pretensions to love for Helen. "The scoundrel!" she exclaimed, bitterly, "surely you didn't think it could be true, Helen?"

"Oh, I don't know what I thought, auntie," replied the girl, wearily. "He is so hateful and I loathe him so, and he was so sly about it, and you wouldn't see what he was! Oh, it was breaking my heart!"

She put her head down on her aunt's shoulder and sobbed like a child. "There, there, dear!" murmured Mrs. Butworth gently, stroking the girl's hair with soft caress, while the tears streamed unheeded down her own cheeks. "I've been a blind, foolish old woman, and it's a just punishment to me!"

Gradually the girl regained her composure, and presently she stood up again. There was a smile on her face now, and her beautiful eyes rested lovingly upon her aunt. "If it had been—if you had wanted me to marry——"

She faltered, and a furious blush incarnadined her whole face.

"Is it Stewart Blake, dear?" asked Mrs. Butworth, very gently.

For answer the girl threw her arms around her aunt's neck again and hid the blushing face. "I'm very happy, auntie, dear," she whispered.

They sat there, silently, a long time, the older woman musing bitterly over the treachery of the man she had so favored, while the girl dreamed joyously

of the future. They were roused at length by a knock at the door, which was opened to admit Lady Edgethorne.

"You will pardon my coming up unannounced, my dear Mrs. Butworth and Helen, won't you?" said My Lady, breezily, "but I am so bursting with news that I couldn't endure to wait, and insisted on coming right up."

Her sharp eyes had already told her something of what had been going on in that room before her arrival. The traces of tears were not yet all removed, but the happiness that shone in the girl's face told the shrewd Lady Edgethorne that all trouble was ended.

"It is very good of you, Lady Sarah," said Mrs. Butworth, as Helen hastened to find a chair for her. "What is the news? You fill me with curiosity."

"Glad news,—and sad," replied Lady Edgethorne, hesitating a little, now that she was at the point of announcement. "I started over to tell you of the engagement of Roberta Wyndham and Prince Kropatchek, and——"

"Roberta and Kropatchek!" both ladies exclaimed together. "I had suspected that," added Helen.

"And on the way," Lady Edgethorne went on, uncertainly, for she was not quite sure how Mrs. Butworth would receive her news, "I learned that—Ybarra is dead."

"Ybarra—*dead!*" cried Helen and her aunt, in one voice. To both the blunt announcement came with a great shock, but to the girl, and even to her

aunt, there was also an instant and indescribable feeling of relief.

"When?" asked Mrs. Butworth, recovering from the shock, while Helen simply gazed in astonishment at Lady Edgethorne.

"Sometime this morning, at the embassy," replied My Lady. "There is a great mystery about it. The evening paper has the mere fact with no details at all. The embassy has refused to make any statement beyond the bare announcement, and you know no one can get in there to find out anything more. Camponero went yesterday afternoon, immediately after his dismissal by the State Department, and there is nobody with any head left at the embassy.

"Now everybody says there will be war at once. Oh, our 'Peacemakers' have made a terrible hash of it again! But here is the Ybarra story."

She held out her copy of the evening paper and was about to read, when a servant came to the door with a card for Helen. The tell-tale crimson showed instantly in her face as she glanced at it.

"It is Mr. Blake," she said to her aunt, and added to the servant: "I will come down."

The two ladies smiled fondly as the girl, with her face still crimson, left the room.

"And that is settled, too?" asked Lady Edgethorne.

"She is very happy," replied Mrs. Butworth.

Blake stood waiting at the door of the reception room as Helen swept down the stairs. The light in her eyes gave answer to the question in his, and his

heart thrilled with a great joy. She put out both hands as she went toward him.

"Stewart," she said, "I am so glad you came!"

By and by, while the two ladies in the room above were still discussing the extraordinary news of the day, there floated up to them the radiant, wonderful voice of the girl, singing again for the first time in many weeks. They ceased talking and listened, and the words that came to them were those of that old favorite song of Blake's:

*"I send my heart up to thee, all my heart
In this my singing.
For the stars help me, and the sea bears part;
The very night is clinging
Closer to Venice's streets, to leave one space
Above me, whence thy face
May lift my joyous heart to thee, its dwelling place!"*

THE END



